

**LIVE ROLE-PLAY OF MEDIEVAL FANTASY  
AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE MEDIA**

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## ABSTRACT

In the postmodern, contemporary Western world of late capitalism, we dream of the Middle Ages. Medieval fantasy, as an entertainment genre, supplements historical images of the Middle Ages with elements of myth in adventure stories featuring magicians, knights and ladies, castles, dragons, swords, and sorcery that are routinely consumed and absorbed. In some activities they are also played out physically. People dress up, utilise props, and affect their speech and mannerisms like actors in a theatre, conducting pseudo-ritualistic games of mimicry to make these images speak and move in the real world: live role-play.

This thesis examines several organised examples of live role-play: Southron Gaard, a branch of the Society for Creative Anachronism based in Christchurch, New Zealand; larping, as represented by two documentary films, *Darkon* and *Monster Camp*, that document the activities of larping organisations in the USA; and 'Lord of the Rings Tour', a tourism trip from Christchurch to 'Edoras', a fictional location from Middle-earth, the fantasy world of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings Novels* and Peter Jackson's filmic adaptations thereof. These organised leisure activities provide platforms for the pursuit of active, physical involvement with the images and ideas of medieval fantasy. In them, participants find ways to bring these fantastic images and ideas onto and into their bodies in reality and, perhaps as a result, closer to their everyday lives in ways that have more significant social implications than may at first be apparent.

## INTRODUCTION

A rangy bearded man dressed in a long black cloak and a tall pointy hat stands atop a wooden stepladder. One hand trembles skyward as if to invoke celestial powers. Shouting a ceaseless stream of invective, he laments the passing of the days when wizards ruled the world and castigates the society he finds himself in. Behind him multi-story concrete buildings block out the sky and buses drift past. People walk past too, seeming to keep their distance. Some glance in his direction. This a recording of The Wizard of New Zealand performing in Christchurch's Cathedral Square, captured on video using a cellphone camera and uploaded to YouTube on 21 February 2008<sup>1</sup>. Having lived in Christchurch my whole life I am familiar with the Wizard's performances. He has been conducting them in this way since the 1970s. Standing in the shadow of Christchurch's Anglican Cathedral – a Gothic Revival icon – I have seen The Wizard challenge and entertain his audiences of passersby. I have watched as tourists, children, and employees taking their lunch breaks gather to listen to him. They sit on benches, and even on the grey paving stones of the Square. Some shout their disagreements, trying to argue with him, but the ranting man carries on seemingly unaffected by the world around him.

The Wizard performs a Merlin-esque character in Christchurch, a modern South Pacific city with a recent colonial history and considerable suburban sprawl, simultaneously invoking fantastic tales of the European Middle Ages as well as popular contemporary media like *The Lord of the Rings*. Watching him perform, it seems as though an essential part of these tales of adventure and magic have made an incursion into the mundane space of the contemporary city. The Wizard's performances are a kind of live role-play that is reiterated and reinforced when they are recorded and disseminated throughout various networks of media.

Many videos of The Wizard on YouTube are attempts to market Christchurch to tourists, however when he first began appearing in the public spaces of the city in 1974 he was a

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1 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aecYCWBm8TI>>. Accessed 24 Mar. 2012.

transgressive, subversive figure. He masqueraded as one versed in mystical practice, claiming a gift of prophecy and the ability to channel powers beyond everyday perception. Casting himself in opposition to what he perceived as the conservative heart of the city, symbolised by the Cathedral, he played the role of a mischievous antagonist to the Church, to the City Council, and to major corporations. Now, almost thirty years later, he has become emblematic, functioning almost like a mascot for Christchurch. The largest city of New Zealand's South Island, Christchurch is the hub for an agrarian economy and is replete with references to its colonial history and its British ancestry, including its Gothic Revival architecture which is exemplified by the Cathedral. In a city famed for being 'more English than England', The Wizard is an emigrant from England himself, and this is detectable in his accent. He is a thematic as well as aesthetic match for the city's architecture, as both look backward in time to a vision of medieval England. As a role-player of medieval fantasy, The Wizard's relationship to the world around him has been subject to change. He has served many social functions. He has been an agitator and a protestor, seeking to change the city, yet he has also come to be inextricably linked with the establishments of government and commercial tourism.

During the writing of this thesis several major earthquakes have struck Christchurch and many buildings in the city have been damaged or destroyed, including the Cathedral in front of which the Wizard regularly performed. In the ongoing social aftermath of these natural disasters The Wizard has gained public attention by attempting to fight against the proposed demolition of damaged heritage buildings. He has repositioned himself as a celebrity fighting for heritage conservation, arguing that the Gothic Revival architecture of the Cathedral and the historical Englishness that it represents are the 'soul' of the city. In his search for a soul, a coherent spiritual or emotional identity, The Wizard looks back to the Gothic Revival, which itself looks back to the Gothic, to the medieval. He's still playing his role, but its orientation has shifted again.

This thesis will examine the live role-play of medieval fantasy and how it relates to the

contemporary world. I will consider the physical representation – the embodiment and enactment – of ideas and images drawn from medieval romance, Scandinavian and Germanic sagas and other myths, as well as folk and fairy tales. I will look at several different instances of live role-play, seeking to distill what sorts of fantasies and desires within contemporary society these ideas of adventure, magic, and heroism are connected with, and also to explore the dangers that might arise when they are acted out physically, in real geographical space. As such, each of its chapters presents a case study of an organisation that fosters live role-play of these ideas and images in its own social context. Each case study focuses on a different kind of cultural phenomenon, but all of them are imbued with similar ideas of adventure, magic, and heroism. These role-plays look backwards and sideways in time to imagined versions of medieval societies in which wizards may be commonplace.

In the first chapter of this thesis I will look at the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA), an international organisation for medieval re-enactment that emerged from the countercultural milieu of Berkeley in the late 1960s. There is an SCA branch currently based in Christchurch, called Southron Gaard, and I attended two of their major events, held at a campsite in rural Canterbury, over the course of one Canterbury summer. While there I partook in the re-creation of a feudalistic society in which everyone role-played the part of a medieval noble. I will consider this collective role-play along the lines of the formal understanding of play developed by Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* in attempt to consider what kind of social experience it might provide for participants. This will allow for an understanding of the wider social functions it might serve, and an exploration of other social phenomena – both contemporary and medieval – that it might be related to.

The second chapter will look at two Live Action Role-play (larp) organisations based in the United States of America; Darkon Wargaming Club in Baltimore and a New England Role-playing Organisation (NERO) franchise based in Seattle. These organisations are both the subjects of feature documentary films that record the activities of the groups' members over the course of

multiple events. Titled *Darkon* and *Monster Camp* respectively, these films offer a constructed view of how larping functions for individual participants. The view that they offer relates particularly to the films' North American context, but may be more widely relevant. Larping is an outgrowth of table-top role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons* and it has become increasingly popular and more established in recent years. It can be seen as an attempt to make these games physical; to bring them off of the table-top and out of players' imaginations; perhaps to make them more real and more satisfying. I will look specifically at how larping might function to fulfill fantasies for individual larpers by utilising a framework established by Freud that connects fantasy with the play of children. I will also further investigate links between live role-play of medieval fantasy and other established social discourses, particularly religion. My main aim in this chapter will be to develop an understanding of the problems and dangers that attempts to play out personally held fantasies might incur, on both social and individual levels.

For the third chapter I will return to New Zealand to examine tourism based on *The Lord of the Rings* in Canterbury. This chapter is also based on my personal experience, as a member of a group on a tour operated by the company Hassle-free Tours called 'Lord of the Rings Tour'. This tour is marketed with the premise of making the fantasy sequences of Tolkien's books and Peter Jackson's film trilogy (*The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), *The Two Towers* (2002), and *The Return of the King* (2003)) real. On it I travelled from Christchurch into the wilderness of the Southern Alps, and also into the fantasy world of Middle-earth. This chapter will examine how ideas of fantasy and role-play might be put to use in a more corporate context, and in more direct relation to media objects. It will branch into areas of media theory and will be in discussion with the considerable body of academic work that has emerged following the popular successes of Peter Jackson's film trilogy, but will remain rooted in the live role-play experience of the tour.

As this thesis draws to a close I will look at one further example, Christchurch Free Theatre's 2008 production *There and Back Again*, an experimental theatre performance that I helped

to produce. This performance provides an explicit counterpoint to the touristic excursion of the third chapter. It was conceived of as an interpretation of Tolkien's fantasy text *The Hobbit* and also as a response to the widespread success of Jackson's films and the repercussions that they might have for New Zealand. As such, and because of its framing as an experimental theatre performance, and as a work of art, it allows for discussion of how live medieval fantasy might be role-played in different ways, and might even become a more critical, more provocative act.

Live role-play of medieval fantasy, as exemplified by the Wizard, works across the middle ground between the everyday and the fantastic. It is held apart from the regular routines of ordinary life, operating on the edges and in the interstices. It is widely believed that fantasy genres are associated with an escapist tendency and popular thought tends to a division between the mundanity of the 'real' world and the perceived excitement of escaping to a fantasy world. In the examples I will look at in this thesis, such an escape is facilitated by the act of role-play. Live role-play offers a way of negotiating experience that could potentially transcend or transform the everyday. It is inherently physical; it is to do with bodies in space. In his role-play performances The Wizard places his body in the symbolic midpoint of contemporary everyday life, at the geographical and symbolic centre of the city. His role-play might, then, be an attempt to bring the fantastic closer to the everyday. When The Wizard puts on his pointy hat he might be seen to stage an escape from the confines of the everyday world, aiming for something more exciting and perhaps more fulfilling. Fist shaking, aiming upwards, he implores his audience to travel at least some of the way with him. Conversely, his shaking fist might be seen as an invocation of fantastic magic, as he seeks to bring his personal fantasies to bear on the world around him.

Role-play like the Wizard's can function to throw aspects of the everyday into high relief, exposing for analysis the nature of our fantasies and the ways that they inform our everyday lives. Because they operate at an interface between the everyday and the theatrical. The Wizard's



performances can be analysed along the lines of Environmental Theatre, the understanding of performance proposed by Richard Schechner. The Wizard makes use of the 'found space' of Cathedral Square, as Schechner suggests, by “engaging in a scenic dialogue” with it (xxx). In this way, the Wizard is in conversation with the city; the materials of the everyday world are folded into his performances. As they become scenic features, they also become part of his dialogue, and perhaps new understandings of the city and everyday life might emerge. In his performances, he figures his surroundings, Cathedral Square and Christchurch, as a re-imagined fantasy version of England that is, like himself, nostalgic for the medieval. Schechner suggests that the environments of our everyday lives are constituted by processes of persistent change, describing them as “active players in complex systems of transformation” (x). The Wizard attempts to influence these transformations, to coerce and develop them along the lines of his own fantastic role-play.

Medieval fantasy, as an entertainment genre, seems to have undergone many increases in popularity over the last several decades, and to have gained significant currency in contemporary Western culture. 1986 saw the publication in English of Umberto Eco's *Travels in Hyperreality* in which he writes “we dream of the Middle Ages so that our era can be defined as a new Middle Ages” (73). This suggestion implies that as a culture, before we even begin to consider activities that reference the Middle Ages overtly such as the SCA and larping, our day to day lives are suffused with visions of the medieval. It also implies that on the level of our imagination we might be collectively complicit in a kind of role-play, that perhaps we attempt to replay the Middle Ages, making them anew in our era by casting ourselves and those around us in the roles of serfs, knights, kings, or wizards.

Eco makes a distinction in the way we look back to the Middle Ages, between “fantastic neomedievalism” and “responsible philological examination”, suggesting that the latter is more significant (63). In this thesis I am more interested in the former. I am concerned with exploring the nebulous ideas of heroism, magic, and adventure that are perhaps best articulated in popular culture

phrases like 'sword and sorcery'. Eco's thoughts are echoed and regenerated almost fifteen years later by the journalist and fantasy author Lev Grossman, who also suggests that America 'dreams' of such medieval fantasy. Specifically, he references visions of “swords and sorcerers, knights and ladies, magic and unicorns ... a nostalgic, sentimental, magical vision of a medieval age” (time.com). This is very much the same 'fantastic neomedievalism' discussed by Eco. It is a familiar vision characterised by its vagueness, that Grossman further describes as “a misty, watercoloured memory” of medieval societies “with plenty of vaseline on the lens” (time.com). This widespread imaginary is referred to throughout this thesis by the term 'medieval fantasy', which is lifted from entertainment genres.

These fantastic images and the ways in which we consume them and dream of them may might work to shape our experiences of the world. They might affect us subtly so that, perhaps less obviously than *The Wizard*, we imagine our individual lives along the lines of Merlin, King Arthur or Guinevere, or perhaps Robin Hood or Beowulf, and seek to play them out accordingly. In 1986 Eco writes of a “neomedieval wave” (61) sweeping across the world in paperback literature, comic books, and films. Perhaps now, a quarter of a century later, this great wave has finished its inceptive cascade and we loll about in the remaining shallows. Fantasy genres are a large part of contemporary media and as such are very much present in capitalist rubrics of advertising and consumption. Packages of narrative and character based on Arthurian legend, feudalistic kingdoms, and child wizards, for example, are routinely produced. As we consume them our fantasies and desires may be shaped by their re-imaginings of medieval societies and stories.

Christchurch, as a postcolonial city – a geographical centre as well as a centre for history, for stories, and for identities – is pervaded by ideas relating to medieval fantasy. With *The Wizard* as a focal point the city is replete with images that are easily lent to fantastic imaginings of medieval England. The Cathedral, which functions as an aesthetic and political backdrop for *The Wizard*'s performances and an icon for tourists, in addition to being a place of worship, is one of many

heritage buildings in Christchurch built in the Gothic Revival style. This style was brought to Canterbury from Europe by the Provincial Architect Benjamin Mountfort and looks backward in time to the Early Middle ages, seeking to revive medieval forms. At the time of its popularity in the early nineteenth century it also sought to re-awaken prior religious attitudes and support a religious ordering of the world, appealing to romantic, anti-modern sentiments. This architectural style has been prevalent in Christchurch and helps to characterise the city. Perhaps so too may the philosophies underpinning it.

In the mid 1980s The Wizard became a mascot of sorts for the Canterbury team within the national rugby tournament. He cast magical spells in order to favourably influence the outcome of matches. The Canterbury Crusaders are a popular and successful rugby franchise based in Christchurch. The team is named in reference to the religious military campaigns of the Middle Ages, and recalls the city's English heritage. The central image of the team's logo is a knight that has a sword raised above his head in preparation for a downward strike, as if about to vanquish a foe. This knight wears a crown on his head and one can see part of a latin cross on his tabard.

I remember being taken, as a child, to see the Crusaders play. More exciting than the rugby match itself was the pre-game entertainment, which was an enactment, a role-play, of medieval fantasy. A replica castle facade stood at one corner of the stadium. Horse-mounted knights emerged from it to gallop around the field several times, holding swords and flaming torches aloft. As they kicked up dirt; 'Conquest of Paradise' by Vangelis trumpeted from speakers in the stands. This brief performance figured the sporting match as a role-play of a medieval battle. It made the skill and tenacity of the players into an echo of the heroics attributed to often-imagined knights on battlefields. At around ten years old I felt very much swept up in the sentiment of the crowd during these moments; I felt pride and delight. This performance functioned to create a sense of unity among attendees and fed into Christchurch's regional identity by compounding the English settler mentality with the brutality and violence of rugby and medieval warfare. In it, re-enactments of an

imagined medieval history grounded those present in a shared, heightened moment. Live role-play functioned to create a sense of shared identity and purpose.

Jean Baudrillard writes of the way that contemporary Western cultures exhume their own histories. He suggests that “our entire and accumulative culture collapses if we cannot stockpile the past in plain view ... we require a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin, which reassures us about our end” (10). It is in this manner that we dream of the Middle Ages, and that Christchurch, led by The Wizard, comes to re-imagine and replay medieval England. Live role-plays of medieval fantasy are one way of stockpiling the cultural heritage of the modern Western world. They are patrimonial enactments, they present us with a rational way of possessing and inhabiting the world around us. They invoke a sense of lineage, a sense of cultural trajectory, and in doing so they can provide a sense of purpose, of furtherance, and of destiny. In Christchurch a visible past, a continuum, and myths of origin can be supplied by the visions of heroism and nobility embodied in the Crusaders and by the image of magical invocation embodied in The Wizard. They simulate a heroic Middle Ages and impart aspects of it to the contemporary city, function to ground Christchurch in ideas of England and in ideas of nobility and chivalry. Live role-play of medieval fantasy, in a wider sense, can perhaps be seen along these lines as a consolidated attempt to establish continuity and communities, to envision and also enact an ordering of the world that is trustworthy and perpetual.

Conjurings of order carried out via role-play have something of play about them. Role-play is a kind of play, and therefore formal understandings of play underpin this thesis. Huizinga (himself a scholar of medieval history) suggests that play is an instinctual force that precedes culture and, as such, has the power to create order. He suggests that play “creates order, *is* order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection” (10). As a young academic in Australia in the 1960s The Wizard – who then went by his birth name, Ian Brackenbury Channell – studied Huizinga's work and he later pays tribute to it in his

autobiography. Reading *Homo Ludens* influenced him to found a student organisation called Action for Love and Freedom, or ALF, that sought to “bring about reform”– to transform power structures and effect political change, perhaps to re-order the world around it – through “a synthesis of hippy and radical approaches” (52). ALF also marked the beginnings of The Wizard as a role. Channell, as the leader of the organisation, became known as 'Grandalf' in obvious imitation of Tolkien's well-known wizard character, Gandalf. Soon after this he began to develop his 'cosmology', his “theory of everything” (wizard.gen.nz), and to speak in public, seeking to share his theories with a large audience, to invoke his imagined order on the world around him. As these public presentations cohered over time and his role as The Wizard solidified with his move to Christchurch, perhaps he sought to make the limited perfections that his role-play allowed more permanent, using role-play to transfigure the world around him, to give it order.

Role-play of medieval fantasy might allow its participants to feel a sense of perfection which they are unable to experience during the course of everyday life. Huizinga suggests that a defining feature of play is its 'extra-ordinary' nature, he writes that “play is distinct from 'ordinary' life both as to locality and duration” (9). The “peculiar order” of play is allowed to reign within defined temporal and spatial boundaries (10). This means that role-play may be seen in the same light as fantasy as an entertainment genre, because it involves an escape or a divergence from ordinary life. The examples of live role-play that I will discuss in this thesis are all carried out in such a way that they are well separated from everyday life, in the first instance geographically. They each orchestrate an escape from the ordinary space of the city. Away from it they create their own frameworks and their own social contexts, within which fantasies relating to images and ideas of the medieval can be explored. This also means that The Wizard, who stays in the city, may be considered as a unique example because he attempts to bring the peculiar orders of his role-play into the world of the everyday. In both cases, however, live role-play of medieval fantasy allows for a temporary sense of perfection and order that is lacking in everyday life, which we can infer may

be considered imperfect and disordered.

Live role-play of medieval fantasy arises from a uniquely postmodern context. Perhaps it can be understood as symptomatic of the hyperconnected, heavily industrialised, and thoroughly mediated conditions of life in urban and suburban environments in the era of late capitalism. It is the recent hyperconnectivity offered by the internet and the predominance of film and game industries that allow for the proliferation of fantastic images that informs the live role-plays I study here. Eco discovered the “neomedieval wave” of entertainment decades ago, on a shelf in a drugstore, when he picked up a comic book (62). Since then, incipient virtual technologies have become mainstream. The internet is always accessible via mobile devices and such entertainments are always close at hand. Innumerable 'neomedieval' images have been sent into orbit, multiplied, rearranged, and beamed back to earth in torrents. Even as I write this thesis I periodically switch windows on my computer using a keyboard shortcut. Instantly, I have found myself watching short video trailers for a new television series, a medieval fantasy titled *Game of Thrones*, that will premiere in the coming days. In this way images and entertainments fragment our contemporary lives. Our routines can be punctuated by fantastic images, sudden bouts of nostalgia, instantaneous visions of the Middle Ages that offer glimpses of order and even perfection.

In his book about the SCA, titled *Medieval Fantasy as Performance*, Michael Cramer cites Frederic Jameson who “maintains that postmodernism's nostalgia is based, at least partially, in a frustration with the fragmentation of contemporary society” (xiv). Postmodernism embraces nostalgia, the impulse to remember and recollect, to make fragmented images cohere, but also to sentimentalise, to blur the lens with vaseline, as Grossman suggests. The re-imagining and re-enactments of medieval fantasy undertaken in the examples of live role-play that I will explore here present, together, a development of this postmodern nostalgia. They can be seen as efforts to create order in response to the disorder of life, to make fragmented images cohere. They may be examples of pastiche, which is defined by Jameson as “the imitation of a peculiar role or unique style, the

wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language” (xv). Live role-play of medieval fantasy imitates a particular stylised and contrived Middle Ages. The appearance of a stylistic mask is perfected in enterprises such as Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* films and then slipped on by role-players who perhaps then enable it to speak and move.

When The Wizard arrived in Cathedral Square in 1974 he called himself a postmodern prophet. He presented himself as a reformer, trying to instigate social change, and even imitated Martin Luther by pinning a proclamation to the door of the Cathedral. His prophecy was, perhaps, evident in his performance, in the way that he looked back to the medieval. He states of his oratory performances around this time; “the medium is the message” (75). His role-play in Cathedral Square offered a way to articulate opposition to the conditions of everyday life by conjuring a vision of the medieval past. As a postmodern prophet he used role-play to advocate a nostalgic return to the Middle Ages.

The examples of live role-play that I will look at in this thesis – The SCA, larping, and *The Lord of the Rings* based tourism – are not an exhaustive list. Medieval fantasy is played out in many other ways and in many other structured organisations throughout the contemporary world. For example, in Treigny, France, work is currently underway to build a medieval-style castle using the construction methods and materials of the thirteenth century. The Guédelon Castle project seeks to recover pre-industrial methods and attitudes. Ethan Gilsdorf suggests that it “appeals to a primal desire ... to live simply, to work hard” (133). Back in New Zealand, The Order of the Boar is a group based in Wellington that undertakes jousting and cavalry tournaments as sporting spectacles. They stage biennial tournaments that are displays of chivalric behaviour<sup>2</sup>. At cosplay (short for costume play) events media fans dress up in imitation of characters from science fiction and fantasy films, television shows, and video games. Cosplay is frequently an important aspect of fan conventions, where fans of science fiction and fantasy genres gather to celebrate the fantasy worlds of the media they consume. Such conventions are held across the world. All of these activities could

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2 <[www.jousting.co.nz](http://www.jousting.co.nz)> Accessed Mar. 24 2012.

be considered as live role-play of medieval fantasy. They are permeated by the ideas and desires that will be discussed in this thesis, and are worthy of exploration in their own right.

Science fiction, as another entertainment genre, is often very similar to medieval fantasy. It also frequently engages with ideas of magic, heroism, and adventure. The *Star Wars* film franchise created by George Lucas<sup>3</sup>, for example, can be understood along the lines of medieval fantasy. It has many narrative and aesthetic similarities to *The Lord of the Rings*. It tells the story of a young knight who must defeat an evil oppressor. Luke Skywalker is a hero figure: he wields a sword in the form of a high-tech 'lightsaber' and utilises magic in the form of 'the force', a ubiquitous metaphysical power. Like *The Lord of the Rings* and many other popular stories, *Star Wars* is drawn around ideas of good triumphing over evil, and the quest of a lone hero. The narrative of *Star Wars* is known to be heavily influenced by the writing of Joseph Campbell and his idea of the 'monomyth', an archetypal pattern for myths and stories of adventure that is created in reference to numerous myths and fairy tales. *Star Wars* and other science fiction stories might be seen to offer modern myths, new fairy tales for the contemporary world, but often they do so by recourse to historical myths, and by evoking images of medieval fantasy.

Campbell writes of the modern world that “In the absence of an effective general mythology, each of us has his private, unrecognised, rudimentary, yet secretly potent pantheon of dream” (4). Contemporary postmodern society can be considered secularised as well as mediatised and capitalised. The Western world may no longer be collectively bound by the religious order of Christianity, as it was to an extent in the actual historical Middle Ages, but it also may no longer share the effective general mythology that Christianity provided. For many individuals the mythology that underlies and motivates everyday postmodern life may in fact be a dream, a fantasy, of the medieval. The images of pointy-hatted wizards and sword-bearing knights that can work to shape our experiences and relationships may be iconic in an almost religious sense, and role-play of

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<sup>3</sup> The *Star Wars* franchise began as a film trilogy (*A New Hope* (1977), *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), and *The Return of the Jedi* (1983)). It has since become much larger, expanding to include a second trilogy as well as a television show and other media.



them – their imitation and embodiment – may be seen as devotional.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Southron Gaard

Late in the year, at the beginning of the New Zealand summer, I arrived at a Crown Tourney in the Kingdom of Lochac. The weekend long event was held by Southron Gaard, a branch of the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA). The SCA is an international organisation dedicated to recreating various aspects of medieval societies. Its governing documents describe it as a “nonprofit educational organisation devoted to study of the Middle Ages and Renaissance”<sup>4</sup> and explain that “most of its activities take place in the context of a structure adapted from the forms of the European Middle Ages” (sca.org.nz). Members of the SCA do a kind of embodied learning by re-creating medieval artifacts and activities; for example one might learn about medieval dressmaking by making a medieval-style of dress using medieval needlework methods. Or, one might learn about medieval archery by similarly making a bow and some arrows then using them to participate in an archery tournament. The structure of the SCA is essentially a re-enactment of a feudalistic medieval royal court, with a king as its focal point, where members put their creations to use as props in a kind of pageantry. Members of the SCA adopt a persona, a medieval alter-ego that they use while engaged in SCA activities. This means that an event such as the Crown Tourney I attended is a large-scale staging, a role-play event that attempts to conjure medieval social structures.

The SCA's role-play extends to cover most of the Western world, which is re-imagined as a collection of kingdoms. Southron Gaard is a Barony, belonging to the Kingdom of Lochac which covers all of Australia and New Zealand. The United States of America, which is the birthplace of the SCA, is divided into many kingdoms, the largest of which are the East Kingdom, covering most Eastern states, and the West Kingdom, covering most of the Western states. The SCA is less popular in Europe than it is in the USA and Australasia, and as such all of Europe is part of a kingdom called Drachenwald. SCA members network across their kingdoms, coming together regularly for

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4 Retrieved from <<http://www.sca.org/docs>>. Accessed 24 Mar. 2012.

camping events where they play out their version of the Middle Ages over several days.

This chapter explores the structured role-play that makes up Southron Gaard as it was played out during events I attended. Upon entering the site of the Crown Tourney, a rented Boys' Brigade camp near Waipara in North Canterbury, I entered the role-played world of the Kingdom of Lochac. Temporarily putting aside the structures and routines of my everyday life, I took part in a collective role-play of a re-imagined medieval society that offered a structure of its own, governed by a role-played King. Over the course of this several day event I joined members of the SCA participating in a wide range of activities; attending markets and displays of medieval arts and sciences, watching performances of songs and plays, and observing combat tournaments. I attended feasts, drinking and reveling. A widely used catchphrase describing the SCA is 'the Middle Ages as they should have been', and it is frequently referred to as 'the current Middle Ages'. This implies that rather than being strictly a re-enactment the SCA is actually a collectively imagined and enacted fantasy of the Middle Ages. These expressions allude to the creativity of SCA members that is suggested by the name of the organisation, and it is this creativity, this kind of artistic license, that makes the SCA distinct from Living History and Renaissance Fair groups. Such groups fastidiously seek a pure and precise authenticity, aiming specifically for historically accurate re-creations of objects and activities. The re-creations of the SCA, however, are more relaxed. They indicate desires not only for something of the medieval – a sense of heroism or adventure – but also for the playfulness and community that are expressed in Southron Gaard's persistent and pervasive role-play of an imagined medieval society.

Southron Gaard's role-play is supported by an organisational apparatus. Members communicate with each other routinely outside of events to organise logistical details. For example, a series of logistical considerations preceded my own attendance at Crown Tourney. My arrival was arranged by a series of emails, some exchanged with the couple who had agreed to take me along with them, and one that was sent to all members of the Barony, proclaiming my intent to visit and

briefing them on the nature of my research. In order to attend an SCA event one must wear clothing that looks like medieval garb. I wore an approximation of medieval clothing that I had acquired from the Barony's 'garb hire' facility, a stack of plastic crates in the garage of a member's home. From these crates I had pulled a pair of loose-fitting cotton trousers, a shirt, and a coat which was a heavy woolen blanket with a clasp sewn into it. I also wore a pair of roman sandals purchased from a department store. The quality of one's garb is important, and some members go to great lengths and make great investments in order to wear historically accurate clothing that is ornately decorated and made using medieval methods. Garb also functions as a kind of costume, however, so appearance is perhaps even more important than quality. This means that I was able to attend wearing a blanket that gave me the appearance of a vaguely medieval character. Considerations such as these ensure that every person on-site, even a visitor like myself, becomes a participant of the role-play.

On the morning of my arrival at Crown Tourney I was introduced to a group of men dressed in tightly fitted trousers and tunics who were extracting heavy wooden thrones from a trailer attached to the back of an SUV. They were setting up the lists, the fenced off area, surrounded by pavilions, where combat tournaments would be held. I offered to help and soon found myself holding tight to the guy-ropes of a wooden-poled fabric tent. This was the pavilion where the King of Lochac was supposed to hold court and watch the tournament being held to determine his successor, and it was in danger of being blown away due to a sudden change of weather. The King was scheduled to hold an important 'Opening Court' that morning which would inaugurate the event and signal the beginning of our collective role-play, so the thrones were carried across the camp, through rain, to a large hall, one of the camp's permanent buildings.

The Opening Court was a role-play of ceremony that instituted the performed social structure of Southron Gaard. A kind of medieval hierarchy was evident in the physical arrangement of the hall. Rows of chairs were set out facing a very low stage, with an aisle between them. On the

stage were four thrones; the two large ones for the King and Queen, and two smaller ones for the Baron and Baroness, whose function is to reflect the royal presence in the Barony. Behind these thrones hung long banners that featured symbols for the peerage orders of Chivalry, Laurel, and Pelican, to which members who excel in skill or dedication can be elevated, receiving a special status in the role-played social structure. The framework of the Barony's role-play, a re-imagined feudalistic royal court, was thus mapped out in the Waipara Boys' Brigade hall; the populace was amassed at the foot of the King, who would be elevated and central. Beside him would be the Baron, his local representative, and behind him his most skilled and dedicated subjects. I sat amongst the populace, a newcomer to the Kingdom. As we awaited the arrival of the King people were engaged in casual conversation, discussing SCA matters as well as everyday life. The play of ceremony began when he entered from the rear of the room. All conversation ceased and everybody stood silently as the King processed down the center of the hall, turning his head to smile politely at us. As he walked through the Boys' Brigade hall towards his throne, the man who was the King projected seriousness and formality, and we responded in kind. He play-acted King, and we play-acted his subjects. We performed regal, courtly formality for each other in a play of ceremony.

As the head of a re-imagined medieval hierarchy the man who acts as the King is a figure around whom the role-play of Southron Gaard coalesces. After he reached the thrones the King's centrality in the role-played social structure of the Barony was reified during a short procedure of swearing fealty. A herald, standing near the King and facing the populace, read words from a scroll which were repeated in turn by a succession of groups. The King and Queen did the same thing in response, creating an antiphony between the royals and their subjects. First, the Baron and Baroness stood with the royals, holding hands in a symbolic show of unity and shared responsibility to the realm, as they swore to protect it. Next, all of the knights who would later fight each other emerged from the populace, drawing their swords and laying them down, they knelt to recite their words of fealty to the King. Finally, although no individual member of the populace was made to swear

fealty, any who wished to do so were given the opportunity, and many of those present. Including myself, did so. As a visitor, an attendee who was not a member of the SCA, I was in some ways assimilated into the collective role-play of Southron Gaard by my joining of the chorus. I took part in the role-play of an interactional agreement.

When the members of Southron Gaard swore fealty to their King, they were performing an entirely serious action in a way that was not entirely serious. It is helpful to understand the Crown Tourney, Southron Gaard, and all of the SCA more formally as a manifestation of play, perhaps even as a monumental game. Huizinga's summary of the "formal characteristics" of play might even be seen to describe the SCA in an abstract way:

We might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. ... It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means. (13)

In this regard the SCA obviously stresses its difference from the common world by disguise, as members dress themselves in medieval or medieval-looking garb. A kind of secrecy surrounds their grouping, as their gatherings for camping events are usually held at isolated rural destinations such as the Boys' Brigade camp. Boundaries of time and space apply to SCA events, too, as the camp was the fixed site for Crown Tourney and it had a fixed duration, being held over a long weekend. Actions carried out within these spatial and temporal boundaries were 'not serious' in that they would have no ramifications for attendee's ordinary, everyday lives. In this sense the entire event is held apart, separated from everyday life. In the SCA exception to this could only be made if something that transcended play occurred, for example if an attendee were severely injured. This means that when we all swore fealty to the King we did so with the knowledge that we were not actually committing ourselves and our lives to his service. We play-acted fealty.

As with the Wizard of New Zealand role-play here constitutes the enactment of a particular order. Huizinga states that "inside the play-ground an absolute and peculiar order reigns" (10). The

same can be said of Crown Tourney and of SCA events in general. Inside the boundaries of the campsite an imitation of medieval feudalism was enacted, and it prevailed over all present. The acting out in role-play of ritual processes such as swearing fealty makes the role-played social order concrete. It enables the collective role-play of a feudalistic society, allocates everyone present a place within that enacted society, and communicates that position to them. In feudal societies swearing fealty was a way of consolidating a relationship between a lord and a vassal. In a generalised view of this relationship the vassal would provide some sort of service, usually military, to the lord in return for possession of land and protection. The vassal was then able to oversee the land and those who laboured on it in the name of the lord. A relationship of vassalage is, according to F.L. Ganshof, “the personal elements in feudalism” and the “most essential feature” of classic feudalism (63). Fealty was often sworn in a religious context, the oath being said over a religious artifact, and this would establish the lord as being closer to God. Thus the lord's high place in the social hierarchy and the bondage of the vassal was ensured. In the SCA these life-binding practices and the oppressive relationships that they facilitate become the substance of play.

Contemporary understandings of feudal social structures often figure them as a set or sets of fixed principles that govern an unchanging system. In the act of writing history the fluidity of social and political relationships can be forgotten or erased. Elizabeth Brown writes of a process whereby the “simplification and regimentation of phenomena” led historians in the eighteenth century to “accept the concept of a uniform feudal government and to concentrate on the system, the construct, instead of investigating the various social and political relationships found in medieval Europe” (1064). The result of such a process is that contemporary understandings of feudalism may be abstracted from actual historical situations. The structures that governed various societies in Europe during the period between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Early Modern era are understood by us in a way that is very much similar to the way we understand the rules of a game, as being absolute and unchanging. Our understanding of medieval social roles may be circumscribed in this

way, and it is this circumscribed, generalised, understanding that was played out at Southron Gaard events.

In Southron Gaard the man acting as King plays the role of a feudal lord and everybody else plays the role of an aristocratic vassal. Unlike historical feudalism there is no clergy in the SCA and, perhaps more interestingly, there are no labourers or serfs. Georges Duby suggests that historical feudalism is in fact made up of a tripartite of orders, “three levels of a hierarchy”. He cites Charles Loyseau, a seventeenth century Parisian who observes that “some are devoted particularly to the service of God; others to the preservation of the State by arms; still others to the task of feeding and maintaining it by peaceful labours (1). In the re-imagined feudalism of the SCA the hierarchical levels of clergy and serfdom are omitted, and only the nobility is enacted. In the role-play of the SCA everyone is noble and there is no oppression. This re-imagining of feudal order in which there is no labouring class holds power over all Southron Gaard events like the rules of a game; it is temporary and perhaps arbitrary, but nevertheless is respected. At Crown Tourney it was customary for members of the SCA to address each other as as 'lord' and 'lady'. This order does not endure outside of the boundaries of SCA events, so the man who is worshipped as a King here does not have regal or lordly powers in other, everyday contexts. Likewise, whatever one's ordinary social status, when members gather to participate in SCA events they all play together at being noble and aristocratic.

Members of the SCA play similarly to the way that Huizinga suggests children can. Huizinga suggests that a child who role-plays by pretending to be something different such as a Prince or a wicked witch or a tiger can become “quite literally 'beside himself' with delight, transported beyond himself to such an extent that he almost believes he is such and such a thing, without, however, wholly losing consciousness of 'ordinary reality'” (14). At Southron Gaard's Crown Tourney there was no chance that attendees would lose consciousness of ordinary reality. Simply put, they remained self aware. The collective role-play of re-imagined feudalism functioned



to transport attendees away from their ordinary lives so that they were, in some ways, beside or beyond them. Individually, they enacted their persona, pretending to be a lord or a lady. Their persona and their re-imagined feudalistic social order did not supplant ordinary life but rather existed as a tangent from it, a temporary divergence, and perhaps a delightful escape. They were never at any great psychological distance from 'ordinary reality' and always retained a connection to everyday life.

In this way the role-play of Southron Gaard sat comfortably alongside ordinary everyday reality, and even worked to incorporate aspects of it. As Opening Court continued the King invited the Steward forward to make announcements. The Steward at Crown Tourney played the role of a medieval steward, but his duties related mostly to protocols and safety procedures necessary in contemporary society. A Steward is a member of the SCA who is responsible for organisational things such as budgeting and site management, and a different Steward or group of Stewards is responsible for each SCA camping event. In the Middle Ages a steward was a head servant who supervised and managed a lord's household and estate, and so here the Steward supervised and managed the event site. He spoke to us at Opening Court firstly about fire safety, explaining the high fire danger and describing the precautions we should take. He then spoke about vehicle parking, referring to cars as 'wagons', and requesting that they be parked on the far side of a row of trees. His safety briefing was delivered as a part of the play and pageantry of the royal court ceremony, and in it many of the ordinary surroundings were co-opted into the role-play of Southron Gaard. A car can be made to participate, to an extent, in the large scale, collective role-play of Southron Gaard; it becomes a wagon but it must be parked out of sight.

Members of Southron Gaard seemed to delight in their role-play and in the temporary transformations that it allowed at Crown Tourney. Like children at play, they were having fun. Michael Cramer, himself a former King of the West Kingdom in the USA and avid SCA participant, writes an academic book on the SCA titled *Medieval Fantasy as Performance*<sup>5</sup>, in which he

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<sup>5</sup> Cramer's book is an extended discussion of the SCA in the USA, written from the point of view of a prominent

ultimately asserts that despite all of the academic considerations that can be made of it one should not read too much into the SCA. He believes it is important to remember that its activities are “just plain fun” (175). According to Huizinga, fun is an essential aspect of a formal understanding of play, it is a “primary category of life” that is familiar to all and worth academic consideration exactly because it “resists all analysis, all logical interpretation” (3). For members of the SCA it is fun to play out a rigid social hierarchy, to role-play a persona and a position within a re-imagined feudalism.

It is, perhaps, not only the medieval componentry of this role-play that is fun, but the fact of role-play itself and the tangential departure from ordinariness that it offers. This offer is taken up in different ways in the SCA. Role-playing a persona was more enjoyable for some members of Southron Gaard than for others, and I spoke with some who had differing views on the function of persona. One man explained to me that for him the SCA had nothing to do with fantasy or role-play, and persona was simply a means to engage in what was fun for him; historical research and sword fighting. A woman, who had an entirely different opinion, directed me to her website where I was able to read a lengthy biography of her persona, an invented history. There are no specific guidelines for SCA members on how persona should be constructed and managed; it is left to individuals to carry out themselves. Cramer corroborates the differing attitudes I encountered in Southron Gaard when he discusses the various degrees of importance that persona can have for individual SCA members. Noting that persona is a “highly contested concept”, he discusses how formulating a persona can be, for some, an opportunity to exercise creativity, to create a fictional character that they then play out. He cites a hypothetical example: “I am a Welsh princess born in 1345 and kidnapped by gypsies at age two...’ etc.” (58). He also, however, references one member of the West Kingdom named Fred Holland whose SCA persona is 'Frederick of Holland', only a slight divergence from his real name (58).

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member. It references much of the theoretical material that I mention here, however it does so with a different set of aims. Cramer seeks to widely validate the SCA, whereas I want to consider it only within the specific framework of this thesis, as a kind of role-play.

Some members of the SCA like Fred Holland and the man I met at Crown Tourney refute the idea of persona and choose not to indulge in the creation of a fictional medieval character. This means that the extent of their role-play is their participation in the re-imagined feudalistic structure, including the play and pageantry of court ceremonies. Persona functions simply (and often literally), then, as a *nom de guerre*. Cramer elaborates that Fred Holland considers 'Frederick of Holland' his 'chosen name' which implies it is his “true identity” (58). This means that in the play of re-enacting the aristocratic, noble stratum of feudalism SCA members are able to enact an aristocratic, noble version of themselves. In line with Huizinga's formal concept of play this aristocratic version of oneself sits outside and alongside ordinary life. Southron Gaard and the wider SCA provides a way of enacting a transformation, transitioning temporarily via role-play to participate in a more noble, more aristocratic, and perhaps also more fun world.

This is a world explored during leisure time. In its dedication to role-play the SCA can be understood as a leisure activity and a form of entertainment. It is carried out after work, when business is finished, in one's own private time. Victor Turner, the cultural anthropologist, develops a specific understanding of leisure time in contemporary Western society. He argues that in leisure we are given freedom “from the forced, chronologically regulated rhythms of factory and office” as well as freedom “to enter, even to generate new symbolic worlds of entertainment, sports, games ... to transcend social structural limitations, to play” (36). By conducting role-play during leisure time SCA members work to seek out enjoyment, to try to fulfill desires and find satisfaction. They work hard, going to great lengths and making great investments, to transcend the limits of ordinary social structures via their collective role-play of a re-imagined medieval society. In Southron Gaard camping events such as the Crown Tourney I attended are held over long weekends. The Barony's largest event – Canterbury Faire, a week-long camp – is held at the height of summer, the time of year normally reserved for holidays. Their role-play at these events, however, does not constitute the generation of or entry into a new symbolic order. Rather, it proceeds from a recourse to a prior

symbolic world, to old models and orders, those of the Middle Ages and feudalism. Going to great lengths in order to re-generate these orders in a collective role-play, as members of Southron Gaard do, suggests a yearning, a desire, for something about them.

It is provocative that in New Zealand, a modern Western country that is widely understood to be civilised and does not feature overt oppression based on race or social class, it could be desirable and fun to re-imagine and re-enact feudalism. To replace, in play, contemporary social orders with an imitation of an order that, in its own historical context, was characterised by military violence and class-based oppression. Perhaps the certainty of a fixed social order in which everybody and everything has a proper and known place is perceived as a kind of antidote to the fractured and fragmented nature of life in postmodern conditions. Ganshof describes the shape of feudalism from a contemporary viewpoint, suggesting it is a “form of society possessing well-marked features that can be defined without difficulty” (xv). The certainty of pre-capitalist social hierarchies, of well-defined social strata headed by hereditarily designated rulers may be seen as more comfortable than the uncertainty and unpredictability of the capitalist order, of free market economies and intra-generational social mobility. In this way the role-play of the SCA represents a kind of inversion insofar as it has the potential to temporarily reverse the uncertainties and anxieties of everyday life.

The role-play of the SCA can be seen as an attempt to achieve a kind of liminality, the state of being that Turner observed, as an ethnographer, during religious rituals and rites of passage in pre-industrial societies wherein social orders become temporarily dislocated or inverted. Turner explains, with reference to these rituals and rites, that “profane social relationships may be discontinued, former rights and obligations suspended, the social order may seem to have been turned upside-down” (27). A necessary corollary of transitioning into the world of role-play at Crown Tourney was that the established orders of the everyday were seemingly put to one side and temporarily receded. Our geographical passage away from Christchurch certainly meant that we

were distanced from the spaces of our everyday lives, our places of work and our homes. Even those who attended with family or friends addressed them using the names of their SCA personae, specific to Southron Gaard. As such, our workplace and familial relationships were put to one side while our collective role-play, our staging of an alternate society, took hold. While I was at the campsite I kept my cellphone in a bag with other personal belongings, and this bag was stored at the back of a tent behind a canvas screen. My cellphone was out of view but it was easily retrievable, I did not forfeit it or renounce it for the duration of Crown Tourney. The same can also be said of my everyday social relations, my rights, and my obligations. Although I put them to one side while I participated in the collective role-play of Southron Gaard they were, along the lines of Huizinga's conception of play, 'not seriously' forsaken. The collective distancing from everyday life apparent in events like Crown Tourney might indicate a desire or a search for liminality, however these events take the form of a tangential diversion from everyday social orders rather than an inversion of them. SCA events like Crown Tourney edge toward liminality but the 'not serious' nature of their role-play means that nothing of the everyday is genuinely abandoned and so, rather, they achieve a semblance of it.

Some months after attending Crown Tourney I returned to Southron Gaard for Canterbury Faire, where the atmosphere was very festive. In order to attend this event, held at the same Boys' Brigade camp, I underwent the same series of preparations that I had previously. I arranged a lift to Waipara via email and even selected the same cloak made out of a blanket from the 'garb hire' facility, which had been relocated to a storage compound in an industrial suburb. When I attended Canterbury Faire I spent a lot of time outside, eating and drinking, sitting and talking with the group that had taken me along with them. As a group of friends in everyday life, made up of several couples, they take part in Southron Gaard events together by playing at being a household, a small group within the collective role-play of the Barony. In emulation of an aristocratic medieval household they camped together at Canterbury Faire, arranging their tents closely and sharing

responsibility for the logistics of camping such as cooking and cleaning. We sat around a table in the middle of their campsite during the afternoon, talking and joking about the SCA and about our everyday lives. Consumption of alcoholic beverages seemed an important part of the event for most members of the household. It had been strongly suggested to me, in an email, that I bring some beer or wine of my own, although I was assured there would be plenty to go around. Being cautious and not wanting to spoil my research by getting drunk I had taken only a small supply which was quickly exhausted. Offers of beer and wine, and even mead brewed using a medieval method, were forthcoming. At the camp we drank from pewter flagons and goblets. These medieval-looking drinking vessels sat atop the table and were periodically refilled from bottles that were kept in chilly bins inside tents. Even in the relaxed context of the household camp, a step back from the formal imitation of ritual process that was the court, with its play-acting of fealty, the order of a re-imagined medieval society held power over us. As we sat in the sun we continued to role-play as medieval nobles.

The man who had won the fighting tournament at Crown Tourney had 'won the crown' and was now playing the role of King of Lochac. The role-play of nobility that coalesced around him was identical in form to what I had observed earlier. The role of King in SCA kingdoms is interchangeable and is taken up by different men multiple times throughout any year. All of these players serve the same function, acting as a fulcrum for the collective role-play of the Kingdom. The King at Canterbury Faire held Court outside, under a pavilion which provided reprieve from mid-afternoon sun and heat. Here, again, all the attendees at the camp gathered to carry out a play of ceremony, including a swearing of fealty. The framework of the Barony's role-play was similarly mapped out in the arrangement of the space. The King and his Queen sat on thrones facing the amassed populace of Southron Gaard and were flanked by the Baron and Baroness, as well as the visiting Baron and Baroness of Ildhafn, the SCA group based in Auckland. In the processes of this Court, with a different King at its centre, the re-imagined feudalistic order of Lochac was again

invoked via collective role-play and made to prevail over the entire week-long event.

Cramer figures SCA Kingdoms in the USA as a contemporary iterations or re-creations of historical medieval 'king games' that involved “the setting up of a mock king or other authoritative figure to reign over a festive period” (88). My experiences with Southron Gaard, however, differ critically from these archaic annual rites. The historical games discussed by Cramer were ritual, and they often featured the kind of inversion that Turner discusses. Cramer cites E.K. Chambers who associates the election of a temporary king - “chosen out of the lowest of the people” (88) - with religious ceremonies involving human sacrifice. SCA events like Canterbury Faire are overtly similar to these ceremonies, often being held annually and being centered around the election by tournament of a man to play the role of King. They are, however, certainly not religious and they are not compulsory. They do not have significance for wider society, only for the select group that attends them. SCA events are framed by the contemporary discourse of leisure as an escape, a kind of holiday, and as such they are a critically different kind of activity. Although they reference these medieval games in their content, their form and the type of role-play that is central to it presents them as something else.

The 'King games' that Cramer discusses are retained, in some ways, in many European societies that are predominantly Catholic. The Munich area in Germany, for example, annually celebrates *fasching*, or carnival, which takes place prior to Lent and involves the temporary establishment of a King and Queen. They are chosen in November to reign over carnival events the following year where they wear costumes and attain a celebrity status. Such carnivals provide an interesting counterpoint to the SCA, which originated in the USA and has spread foremostly to Australia and New Zealand, countries that are identified as being primarily secular. Carnival in these societies serves a social function as it provides a period of civic celebration immediately prior to Lent, a period of religious devotion. During the festivities of carnival people feast, party, and drink, often in masquerade, and often in public. In carnival they indulge excessively, whereas

subsequently during Lent they may fast or give up other luxuries. Mikhail Bakhtin suggests that in the Middle Ages and Renaissance carnival, with its feasts and ceremonies, “had an important place in the life of medieval man” (5) because it “offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations” (6). Similarly, in contemporary Catholic societies carnival represents a different aspect of the world; a period of excess before a period of penitence through deprivation. Perhaps the SCA can be seen as an attempt to re-stage components of carnival in secular contexts. Festivity and excess certainly had an important place in the role-play of the Southron Gaard at Canterbury Faire, which was itself a perduring masquerade.

The relaxed festivity of the household camp and the play of ceremony of the King's court came together during my final evening at Canterbury Faire at a royal feast, a celebration of excess. The feast was held indoors, in the same hall that had accommodated Opening Court at Crown Tourney several months earlier. The pseudo-feudalistic order was in full effect for its duration. The King was the focal point of the evening. He sat at a head table at one end of the room, facing the other tables, with his Queen and his retinue on either side of him. Tables for other attendees were scattered throughout the room, including the one I sat at with members of the household. The meal was brought out from a kitchen in multiple courses. Each time a dish was served it was carried, past all of the tables, to the King, who had the privilege of selecting his food first. The members of the household who I sat with drank throughout the evening, refilling their tankards and goblets from bottles that were concealed underneath the table. As the evening progressed they became increasingly drunk and began to sing songs. Throughout the evening their collective volume increased and they exhausted their repertoire of medieval songs, singing contemporary ones instead. At one point some of them stood to sing 'The Star-Spangled Banner'. Their revels were disruptive to other groups seated in the hall, and it was clear that many found them annoying. During the final course some men of the household stood, one by one, and approached the King's table. They bowed,



curtsied, and performed magic tricks, jokes, and songs exclusively for the King and Queen. At this stage, late in the evening, they were certainly drunk to a point of incapacitation and their tricks were executed poorly. Their private performances became facetious, a mockery of the role of King and the semblance of regal authority that it represented. They transgressed not only the role-play order of feudalistic protocol, in which one must defer to the King, but perhaps also the everyday order of politeness.

This feast, and the behaviour of the household at it, was characteristic of my experience of the SCA. At Crown Tourney and Canterbury Faire members of Southron Gaard gathered to engage in collective role-plays that were, in essence, playful enactments of ritual spectacle and carnival festivity. Attendees were not engaged in ritual themselves with regard to transforming their own lives. Rather, they were play-acting ritual as a means of temporarily escaping from their own lives. In the historical medieval carnival rituals that Bakhtin writes about people “built a second world and a second life outside officialdom” (6). At the SCA events I attended people role-played, pretending to be medieval citizens bound by social relationships confirmed through rituals of fealty. They also role-played minor transgressions of that fealty in festive contexts. Their world of role-play was separated from ordinary or everyday life not in the mode of ritual inversion, but in the mode of play and of play-acting.

The collective role-play of the SCA is a simulation of both feudal ritual and carnival. It is conducted as leisure and entertainment, for fun. For its participants, then, the rest of life – everyday or ordinary life – may be figured as much like Lent; an experience of prohibition and penitence. The role-play of The Kingdom of Lochac, with its recognisable and unchanging social hierarchies provides a foil, an experience that is the total opposite to the perceived structureless vacuum of ordinary life. The protocols and rules of the re-imagined medieval framework that it illuminates may be understood to present a fullness, a richness and even an excess, that is a point of comparison with a lack felt during everyday life. In contemporary Western countries, particularly secular ones

such as the USA and New Zealand, the desire to role-play medieval fantasy may come from feelings of deprivation. Events like Crown Tourney and Canterbury Faire may represent efforts to recover the richness of carnival and overtly celebrated rituals, and role-play is the means by which these efforts are propelled.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Larping: *Darkon* and *Monster Camp***

I begin this chapter by discussing *Darkon*, a 2006 documentary film that has as its subject members of a North American live action role-play (larp) organisation called The Darkon Wargaming Club, and I later discuss another, similar film called *Monster Camp* (2007). This marks a significant shift in the configuration of my analysis. While the first chapter of this thesis is based on first-hand observations of my own unmediated experiences, here I will be dealing with material filtered through the apparatuses of film and the internet and thus will be approaching my topic from a comparatively remote and foreign perspective. This will inevitably make for a different type of enquiry, which I believe to be appropriate, given that here my subject deals more explicitly with images drawn from contemporary media, easily locatable in Hollywood genre films, the popular imagination of the USA. I set out, at first, to examine the role-play of larpers as it is represented by the makers of these two documentaries. As filmmakers, they are very active in the plays of representation that occur, and this engenders a set of issues that are aligned with the central questions of this thesis. Their own biases and methods of representation are illustrative of particular views on fantasy and role-play that are operative in the very casting of larpers as documentary subjects – the fact these films exist suggests that larpers are peculiar enough to warrant our attention, and also entertaining enough to sustain it. The larpers themselves become the stars of these films, and thus may be seen to come full-circle, as their embodied fantasy play is figured as a kind of mediatised fantasy drama. This is most evident in the opening sequence of *Darkon*.

The film begins with a slow-moving aerial shot of a wide river bordered on both sides by dense forest. The score is an ominous groan of stringed instruments. An archaic looking font slowly appears, superimposed onto this scene of nature. It reads:

It is a time of unrest in the realm of Darkon  
As Bannor of Laconia seeks to bring

Keldar, leader of the Mordomian empire,  
Before a War Crimes tribunal.

Here the film imitates an actual fantasy film. It veers between generic fantasy entertainment and quasi-critical documentary, and in doing so it echoes the role-play of the larpers themselves. It plays with the fiction of Darkon. In this fictional realm, which is played out by the larpers then documented and replayed in the film, Bannor and Keldar are the leaders of opposing armies. However, the two men who role-play these fantasy characters – Skip and Kenyon – are actually the principal characters of the film. The next image we see is a close-up shot of an underground stream; flickering torchlight is reflected on damp black stones. The superimposed text reappears, continuing to narrate the story of Darkon:

Far below the surface of the realm.  
The Dark Elves grow eager to profit from the  
Upheaval brought on by this conflict.

As the opening sequence continues we are introduced to the Dark Elves in an underground cavern. They have black faces and red eyes and are dressed in chain mail and hooded cloaks. They speak in an unrecognisable language and move slowly around an altar of stone. Subtitles help us to understand that they are ritually sacrificing a human woman to their god, Loth, before embarking towards the surface. This prologue sequence ends as these shadowy figures emerge, carrying large weapons, from a cave in the forest.

These figures are, of course, not actually elves. They are not actors playing elves either, at least not in any conventional sense. They are larpers. Larping is a formalised leisure activity gaining popularity and notoriety throughout western society. As it is represented in *Darkon*, the live action role-play of larping is derived from tabletop role-playing games, as well as fantasy genre novels and films, so it is an evolution of this structured kind of gaming and larpers are, in a way, evolved gamers as well as play-actors. Larpers physically portray fictional characters in controlled fictional environments, often outdoors and often, like the SCA, in rural or semi-rural locations. They dress up in costumes and alter their speech and mannerisms to represent characters of their own making –

here specifically from the fantasy idiom: heroic knights, devious elves, powerful magi, etc. – and interact with each other in environments that are often aesthetically altered using set pieces and props. The characters of the Dark Elves are filmed for *Darkon* in costume and on location. Their armour and cloaks are costumes, and the natural set is furnished with fiery torches. The conceit of their fantasy world comes immediately undone, however, when we see at the last moment before a cut that the weapon strapped to the back of one elf is not a weapon at all, nor does it even look like one. It is a large, bright red, foam-padded stick, called a 'boffer', that stands in for a sword or axe, and with which a larper can safely strike an opponent. In this moment the theatrical gives way to the documentary and the peculiarity of larping is exposed.

In *Monster Camp* an interviewee describes larpers, including herself, as “fantasy freaks”. This descriptor is also used by Ethan Gilsdorf, in his book *Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks*. They use the word 'fantasy' to indicate an entertainment genre, but in this chapter I aim to explore the motivating mental fantasies and the desires of larpers featured in *Darkon* and *Monster Camp*. Larping is widely thought to be the territory of geeks or nerds who overindulge in fantasy genres, who take their fantasy fandom to such an extreme that they attempt to embody it, to make their own bodies sites for it, and therefore to physically participate in fantasy texts or imagined fantasy worlds. I aim to investigate the relationships between larpers and the ideas and images that are at the core of their activities. These are images made ubiquitous in contemporary western society through proliferation of fantasy tropes in films, television shows, books, games, and advertising. The DVD cover of *Darkon* features a picture of a man, silhouetted against a cloudy sky, resting his hand on a long sword that seems to be stuck in the ground. It is an easily recognisable image of a lone male facing uncertainty with strength, essentially a heroic image. This man is Bannor of Laconia, or Skip playing Bannor, and his weapon is also a boffer rather than actual sword, but we can't see that.

The groups I will study in this chapter make use exclusively of medieval-fantasy

conventions. They are exemplary of a kind of larping that has a particularly North American resonance. The Darkon Wargaming Club is based in Baltimore, Maryland, and *Monster Camp* documents the activities of the New England Role-Playing Organisation (NERO). Along with the sword-and-sorcery style fantasy of Darkon that I will discuss in this chapter, horror and science fiction are also popular larp genres. Established fictional worlds are even used as a basis for larps, for example *Cthulu Live*<sup>6</sup> is a larp game set in the worlds of H.P. Lovecraft. Larping is distinguished from other kinds of role-playing games because of its theatrical physicality. In a tabletop role-playing game actions are described verbally between players who sit together at a table. In role-playing computer and video games players use technological interfaces to control virtual characters in virtual environments. The interactions of players in fantasy larps like Darkon and NERO primarily take the form of staged battles that are carried out outdoors, in parks or at campsites, and which make use of conventional gaming systems referred to by some as 'Gygaxian' because they are directly inherited from *Dungeons and Dragons*, which was invented by Gary Gygax in 1974. These battles are always competitive, and are fought with the use of algorithms that larpers memorise and process as they play. Each larper enters into a battle with a set amount of numerical points and as they are struck they deduct points, different quantities for different types of weapons and magical spells. When their points expire larpers die, or rather, they play dead. Specific rules vary in different organisations, but the rules of larping tend to be incredibly complex. The Darkon Rulebook of January 2009<sup>7</sup>, for example, is 228 pages long. Players in the Darkon Wargaming club stage their battles in the terrain of the real world where factions fight for territory in the fictional world of Darkon, which is represented by hexagonal segments on a computer generated map.

As the documentary *Darkon* continues we see an image of this map scroll across the frame. It slowly fades into a second slow aerial shot, this time of suburban America, specifically Baltimore. In direct contrast with the wide river of the beginning shot, here a narrow asphalt street is bordered

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6 <[www.cthululives.org](http://www.cthululives.org)> Accessed 24 Mar. 2012.

7 Retrieved from <[www.darkon.org/rules.html](http://www.darkon.org/rules.html)> accessed on 12 Jul. 2010.

with densely situated houses that, from above, nearly look identical. In the instant of the fade, for a small moment the fantasy of Darkon and the reality of life in the suburbs are simultaneously mapped out, existing together in the frame of the film. When this shot is compared with the opening image of the film, that of the running river, it certainly seems that a relationship of contrast and opposition is beginning to become apparent. In this contrast, unintentionally made apparent through the filmic techniques of the aerial shot and the slow fade, the imaginary world of Darkon (and of larping in general) is embodied in the image of a wild river coursing powerfully through a forested expanse. It is potent and in motion, it can transport you to other places, things may live and lurk in its depth, and it may also be dangerous. The reality of life in a modern western suburb is expressed in the unremarkable scene of a slow moving middle class street. It is predictable, dull, and comparatively static: it is grey and autumnal, withering.

Larping is made to seem more alive than everyday life. The ostentation of role-play and the imagined possibilities for heroism and magic can be seen as a flip side of suburbia, or a dark side as the name 'Darkon' suggests. In this way *Darkon*, as a film, is a lot like *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) and other popular American suburban fantasies in that it shows the fantastic emerging from the mundane as the result of a desire for some kind of transcendence, for a more exciting, vital experience. This is often an adult desire that is connected with childhood. In *E.T.*, for example, the protagonist is a child called Elliot, who establishes a psychic link with an extra-terrestrial being that he hides from his parents. Imagining creatures from other worlds may be inconceivable to many adults, but common for children whose experience of the world is arguably more playful and less defined by structural segmentations. Although the fantasies of Darkon and other larp groups are made tangible through playfully cracking the fabric of the everyday – in the figurative transformation of a park into magical kingdom, for example – it is crucial that the distinction between the perceived banality of suburbia and the excitement of larping's fantasy role-play does not break down. In the suburbia of *Darkon* reality and fantasy remain separate but share a kind of

reciprocity. There is a relationship of necessity established wherein larpers need their fantasies in order to survive their suburban lives.

By sharing in this, *Darkon* potentially reiterates a widely held point of view that fantasy genres and activities that make use of them are connected with escapist and regressive tendencies that are socially unproductive and perhaps unhealthy, the result of a desire to separate oneself from the workings and routines of everyday life, as much as one can, in favour of something else. Perhaps to regress to childhood or adolescence. This point of view has probably contributed to a popular perception that fantasy genres are the territory of immature weirdos, primarily adolescent males, who are thought to be socially inept to such a point that they remain child-like and are unable to function successfully in the real world. Larping might, in line with this point of view, represent an extreme end point; an attempt to physically transform oneself through role-play into a character of fantasy, and thus an attempt to abdicate from one's own social existence. Interestingly, this view seems to be upheld by the majority of larpers interviewed in *Darkon* and *Monster Camp*, many of whom are indeed adolescent males, and many of whom associate the role-played fictions of larping with feelings of being in control that are lacking in their everyday lives in suburbia. In *Darkon* one states plainly, "This is [mum's] house, she's in control. I go to work, my boss is in control. I go to Darkon, I'm in control".

I find this viewpoint to be somewhat reductive. The prevalence of these ideas means that it is easy to marginalise and condescend when discussing larping and larpers.<sup>8</sup> Conversely, it is perhaps too simple to argue for the elevation of larping, for a repositioning of it as an iteration of fantasy role-play that is more meaningful and more interesting than the table-top and the virtual. I aim to avoid this here. Rather, I seek to properly consider the social functions of larping, as embodied fantasy role-play, and also to position it specifically in relation to the SCA, with which it shares many features. Perhaps because it is a uniquely embodied and physical kind of role-play larping represents a desire to bring ideas of heroism and magic, apparent in fantasy genres, closer to

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<sup>8</sup> Larping is often an object of ridicule on the internet and in Hollywood comedy films such as *Role Models* (2008).



the everyday. Or, it may be that the magic of larping is enhanced by its proximity to the everyday, which is seen as emphatically lacking in magic. If larpers are seeking to separate themselves from the workings of everyday life then it is important to ask, what is the nature of the separation that they desire? Larping may be seen as pure escapism, an indulgent and anti-social retreat. It may be connected with a reversion to the immature impulses of childhood and adolescence and thusly considered a kind of ego satisfaction or regression. Or, it could instead be considered a bold repudiation of the mundane politics of everyday life, a seeking out of something better and more vital than suburban society. It may even provide a creative or imaginative way of critiquing that society, its role-play becoming a means to artistically transform or transcend the suburban slough.

A link between play, art, and regression is made in Freud's short essay "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" (1907) that provides a way of discussing larping with these possibilities in mind. This current translation of the essay's title is, unfortunately, potentially limiting of the wide range of applicability that it may have. German editions are given the title "Der Dichter und das Phantasieren", and it has previously been translated as "The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming", which perhaps suits this discussion better. Freud does not limit his deliberation to day-dreaming, but implies all kinds of fantasising and imaginative thought. In this essay he deals with these processes, as well as with the mental processes of poeticising – of making artistic creations, specifically writing fiction. He associates the work of a poet with daydreams, suggesting that both should be considered "a continuation of, and a substitute for, what was once the play of childhood" (152). He begins with a lengthy discussion of child's play, suggesting that "every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him" (143-144). In this way he seems to foreshadow both Huizinga's and Henricks' understanding of play, initially framing it as an impulse of experimentation, aimed toward betterment.

Larpers, like the SCA, do exactly this kind of re-arranging. In the act of role-playing a battle

between fictional armies in a suburban park, for example, they are implicitly transforming the park into a battleground. In the hex map of *Darkon* this battleground then becomes part of a larger re-arranged world. Nomenclature is a way of confirming this re-arranging, as instead of 'the park' it may be referred to as 'Laconia' or 'Mordomia' or any other specific name. If the fictional battle is a naval one, then parts of the park will be segregated and delineated; in the role-play of the larp these parts are transformed into boats, and stepping over an imaginary line means a player is drowned. Larping is an imaginative kind of play done mostly by adults rather than children, however it is useful still to consider it along the lines provided by Freud; as a manipulation of the substance of the world intended to better satisfy the manipulators. Freud continues, suggesting that “the growing child, when he stops playing, gives up nothing but the link with real objects; instead of *playing*, he now *phantasies* [sic]. He builds castles in the air and creates what are called *day-dreams* (145). Coincidentally, the larpers featured in *Darkon* build a mock-castle in real life as a stage for one of their fantasy battles, which they then burn afterwards. They also build a large dragon. Skip, smoking a cigarette while he stands amongst the ashes of the castle says “it was worth putting in the effort to create a prop that helped you to suspend that disbelief”, which is perhaps indicative of a desire to maintain a link with real objects, and might make his larping an attempt to continue to play in a childlike way, or to substitute the play of childhood.

In this way larping ought to be considered a kind of formalised play, like child's play but performed by adults. Its essence is a crude kind of poesis. Huizinga suggests that in play, a child is “*making an image* of something different, something more beautiful, or more sublime, or more dangerous than what he usually *is* ... without, however, wholly losing consciousness of 'ordinary reality' (14). Larping provides a way for adults to do this. It involves the creation of a fantasy world that is positioned in relation to larpers' experience of everyday life. Entry into this world is contingent, to some extent, on suspension of disbelief, on the acceptance that a park can also be a more beautiful, or sublime, or more dangerous sword-and-sorcery battleground. *Darkon* shows us

that Skip's dragon, and all of Darkon, is positioned in relation to Baltimore as an escape from it, or as an overlay on top of it. Larping makes this relationship obvious because in it the imaginative act is physical. In order to function the fantastic role-play worlds of larping need this connection with the tangible, the bodily, and the topographical.

In both play and poetics, Freud argues, one “creates a world of phantasy” (144), and so the processes of creative play observed in larping may share something of the poetic. Larpers sometimes refer to their creative process as 'sub-creation', which is a term derived from J.R.R. Tolkien and therefore associated with fantasy genres. People engaged in other activities that make use of fantasy genres, particularly gamers, use the term 'worldbuilding' to describe the processes of imagining and setting out the fictional worlds they set their stories in; inventing civilisations, mapping them, creating cities, monsters, etc.

The worlds invented in this way by larpers are certainly worlds of mental fantasy and for Freud all such fantasy proceeds from the motive of wish fulfillment. He states: “the motive forces of phantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single phantasy is the fulfillment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality” (146). In this way larpers and other fantasy fans may create for themselves ideal worlds that are more satisfying than the realities they are faced with in suburban America. Worlds like Darkon, with all of their emphasis on heroic violence and world-altering magic, may represent utopian visions for their participants. Freud goes on to warn, however, that “if phantasies become over-luxuriant and over-powerful, the conditions are laid for an onset of neurosis or psychosis” (148). This suggests that if one places too much emphasis on the fictional worlds of their fantasies, diverting their attention too often and too regularly away from their home life or work life or school life, their involvement in worlds of fantasy may become detrimental to their psychological involvement in the real world. Here Freud's theories on play may lead to conclusions that are crucially different to Huizinga's. Fantasy based role-play might be seen as pathological instead of liberating. If larping is an attempt to play out an ideal world in which unsatisfying

features of reality are eliminated or rectified then participation in it may be seen as tantamount to a denial of reality. Play as a place for experimentation, the “laboratory of the possible” (1) that Thomas Henricks describes, may actually have dire consequences, and the results of such experimentations may be disastrous. One could go so far in attempting alterations or corrections to reality that they become entirely dissociated from their surroundings.

Although those who indulge in the imaginative excesses of fantasy genres, so thoroughly inventing alternate worlds and alternate societies, are certainly often thought of as strange (as indeed the phrase 'fantasy freaks' indicates) it seems unlikely that because of this alone they could be considered neurotic or psychotic. Perhaps this is where Freud's essay is no longer useful, and we reach the limits of its applicability. Writing over a century ago, he argues that as we become adults, we come to be ashamed of our fantasies (145), but in contemporary society this may no longer be true. In *Southron Gaard* the operative fantasies of chivalry and heroism are downplayed, and the acting out of these fantasies in role-play is considered part of a kind of research. In larping, however, the fantasies upon which collective role-play are based come to be seen as valuable; a marker of personality or identity. Something that sets one apart from the rest of society, that marks one out in a positive way. For the most part, larpers seem proud of their perceived strangeness, and larping becomes an opportunity to 'let their freak flag fly'.

Both *Darkon* and *Monster Camp* curate an image of larping as something quite bizarre but ultimately light and whimsical, not genuinely freakish or seriously dangerous in a neurotic or pathological way. *Monster Camp* is scored with upbeat, jingly electronic music that is reminiscent of an after-school television program and often functions to undermine its subjects attempts at profundity. The DVD comes packaged in a cover featuring colourful illustrations of several larpers in costume, smiling while bearing swords and axes. These images are shown, during the film, as the final credits roll and the soundtrack music fades in, and so the last images the viewer is left with are of larpers made to seem childlike. They are not quite infantilised, but cartoonised or caricatured.

Through the framing of the film the adulthood of the larpers is removed. The title of the film even suggests at the outset that the larping experience – the 'monster camp' – is comparative to a school camp or a summer camp, and these are the activities of children and teenagers, not adults. This may be symptomatic of the way that the entertainment industry, particularly in its use of fantasy genres, is increasingly centered around content aimed at teenagers and children, but consumed by adults. This trend of infantilising consumers is indicated by the recent popularity of film franchises like *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, which are both adaptations of books for adolescents. In contemporary western societies we may not become ashamed of our fantasies, instead we may look for and invent ways to role-play them out. But we also, in this regard, may not stop being children.

In *Darkon* larping is shown clearly to be an attempt to make amends for unsatisfying reality for Skip Lipman. He describes his dissatisfactions with the reality of his life as a stay-at-home father in suburban Baltimore, speaking uninterruptedly to the camera:

In Everyday life, most of the time, you don't get to be the hero. Most people either spend their time not doing anything or being a victim ... everything good and noble in the world has disappeared and been replaced with Walmart, McDonald's, and Burger King.

In this statement Skip identifies corporate capitalism as the object of his dissatisfaction, figuring notably international corporations as the enemy, as evil and dishonourable. In the fictional world of *Darkon* Skip plays Bannor, the leader of a small nation called Laconia. This character, created by Skip in the mold of an archetypal epic hero, seeks to lead his small army in what he believes to be a noble battle against the Mordomian Empire, which is another much larger and more dominant nation. It is perhaps because of this that throughout the film Skip comes to fill the position of a kind of protagonist. He functions as a spokesman for all the larpers united in the fictional country of Laconia, and for all those who find something positive or rectifying in larping. Through Skip and Laconia, viewers of *Darkon* are shown that larping can be an avenue for attaining the nobility and heroism they have identified as lacking in everyday life. Bannor is portrayed in the film as a similar kind of character to Robin Hood; he is defiant, a unifying leader, fighting against a more powerful

enemy in a sort of David against Goliath scenario as he takes on the Mordorian leader, Keldar, in role-play battles.

Skip is a creator of sorts as well as a play-actor, and he can be seen to make use of such recurrent mythological ideas in order to construct the image of his heroic character. This image is then put to use, in a collective way with others, to physically play out a fantasy that remedies his personal frustrations. From the perspective of the viewer, watching the documentary, one can see that larping is image based. In Bannor and Laconia, a concrete image of heroism solidifies that is somewhat familiar. Skip portrays himself, and is portrayed by the filmmakers, in a way that has clear precedents in myth, folklore, and actual history, and even more so in the contemporary media of films, books, and video games. The emblem of Laconia is a lion, a common charge in medieval heraldry that most often symbolises bravery, valour, or royal heritage. It is seen in a stylised form, rampant on the larpers' heavily padded shields and banners. The name Laconia is taken from the geographical location on the Peloponnesian peninsula of the ancient Spartan society, which is well known for being skilled at warfare and having militaristic dominance over Athens, despite its smaller size. This Spartan society was represented in a popular 2007 film, *300*, which is notable for its stylised violence and depiction of heavily muscled, semi-nude men. By combining, arranging, and re-arranging images such as these, larpers create a kind of pastiche that becomes the substance of their play. In this way they actually re-play stories familiar from myth, medieval history, and films. By playing at being the heroic warrior Bannor of Laconia, Skip is playing at being a hero, and can perhaps see himself as possessing some kind of heroism. He can seemingly become a hero. Thus he can be considered similarly to the child that Freud discusses who, in play, rearranges the world in order to please himself. In his rearranged world he is a respected and influential leader, he embodies nobility and heroism, and in play his body becomes a site for those things which he believes are lacking in everyday life. Skip and Bannor show us that larping is a truly imaginative act, it is a play of images made physical, and put to use to remedy personal dissatisfactions.

Larping is shown, in *Darkon*, to not only facilitate such individual transformations.

Similarly to the SCA, larping is a collective, community forming kind of play, and the communities created in-play might also extend to the everyday world. During the play of *Darkon*, the Laconian community is motivated by the ideals that their images imply, and one may presume that their ideals are operative whenever the group gathers. In *Darkon* they are shown not only fighting role-play battles together, but also in more ordinary social contexts, such as having a barbeque, eating together. Skip's dissatisfactions with contemporary suburban life are shared by the entire group, and his words are repeated almost verbatim by another larper, Andrew, a teenager who role-plays a character called Shapwin:

Some people just want more. Some people are tired of working their ass off for material goods so that you could just watch TV and sit around and stay in your house. ... Everything that was once noble and good in this world is gone and it's just replaced with Walmart. ... That's how it is in America, suburban sprawl, the same building you see in Texas you'll see in Virginia, you know. It's pretty bad”

Andrew, like Skip, identifies problems with capitalistic frameworks, and seeks to remedy his disaffection through larping, which he sees as “adventure”, a foil to the predictability of the suburban sprawl. As we hear him speak we see him, in his bedroom, swinging a boffer. He strikes at the white walls and at his wardrobe, and this gives the viewer the impression that he feels trapped, futilely locked in to rhythms of consumption that play out in rooms like his all across America. Undeniably a part of the middle class suburban sprawl himself, like Skip and the other larpers in Laconia, he values nobility, chivalry, and honour. This unites these larpers in opposition to the dominant values of the society they inhabit. Throughout the film they refer to their group as the “brotherhood of Laconia”, a phrase that at once implies a close personal connection, intimates their creation – their shared image – and also belies the fact that their group is almost exclusively male. In Laconia a sublime image has been generated, and this has been the basis for the formation of a social group with a core constituency who share closely defined moral values. Individual larp groups might be seen as a part of the sprawl that Andrew references, networked across the US in

various franchises and guises. In *Darkon* another group has coalesced around a character called Nemesis, who is role-played by Rebecca Thurmond. One member of this group says, “Becky created a family”. In *Monster Camp* there are several groups in the featured NERO franchise, and NERO has spawned many other groups such as LAIRE<sup>9</sup> and SOLAR<sup>10</sup>. Although they do not necessarily all share the images and ideals of Laconia, these groups might constitute a loosely connected organisation, they all are playing games of role-play with recourse to fantastic, mythical ideas of heroism and magic, and all are set in opposition to everyday life.

This might be considered as a kind of pseudo-religious method of social organisation, but its opposition to the everyday may run deeper and be expressed in a way that is considerably more violent. In this regard some instances of larping may be seen as pseudo-fascist fantasies. In the instance of Laconia, a moral agenda becomes an ideological stance. Another larper, Frank, who role-plays one of Bannor's allies, proposes a functional link between the larp world and the real world. Speaking about the Mordomian Empire he says “we're the Terrorists and Mordom is the United States. They're the superpower and we're the terrorists. We're striking out, you know, the best we can”. In this statement he offers an allegorical understanding in which Mordom is seen as representative of an imperialism, a cultural dominance, and a military prevalence that are associated with the United States. In his understanding those who oppose Mordom represent insurgency, rebelliousness, and the underdog spirit, the David against the Goliath. It may seem strange that this larper should seek some sort of equivalency between the ideological positioning of the fantasised brotherhood of Laconia and that of religious extremists who have orchestrated violent crimes against his own country in the real world. His statement could be taken as an admission of Anti-Americanism, and the critical attitude underpinning his words can be understood as a more violent expression of the dissatisfaction voiced by Skip and Andrew. He voices his own frustrations with hierarchical capitalistic frameworks, and perhaps seeks an active critique of capitalist society. In the

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9 <[www.laire.com](http://www.laire.com)>. Accessed 24 Mar. 2012.

10 <[www.solarinc.org](http://www.solarinc.org)>. Accessed 24 Mar. 2012.



fantasy role-play of larping he can switch sides, to fight against that which frustrates him and disempowers him.

This is a kind of critique that may be seen to have origins similar to the ideologically extreme and socially violent day-dreaming put into action by figures such as Hitler and Mussolini. Before he came to power Adolf Hitler famously expressed very similar frustrations, stating the the Nazis were positioned as “enemies of today's capitalistic economic system for the exploitation of the economically weak, with its unfair salaries, with its unseemly evaluation of a human being according to wealth and property instead of of responsibility and performance” ( Toland 180). The rise of the Nazis, in large part because of this appeal to perceived disenfranchisement, and the persistence of their fascist ideologies in neo-nazi groups and organisations like the KKK shows how endemic and widespread this kind of dissatisfaction may be. Instead of seeking to violently transform real world social orders, larps like Darkon offer a subsidiary world, a contained fantasy realm in which the possibility exists that they could be evaluated according to a different, non-capitalistic framework of understanding. One larper describes Darkon in this regard as a 'levelling ground'. Rather than accrual of capital, the framework of understanding offered by Laconia is based on heroic deeds and noble origins, both of which can be actuated in role-play. This was also an understanding of individual worth and social value expounded by the Nazis, and it endures to the present in the views of extremist groups like the KKK. In an attempt to explain these strains of aryanism, recurrent throughout Europe and America, Mircea Eliade classifies aryanism as a kind of “mythical behaviour” (183), suggesting that the “racist myth of 'Aryanism’” can be explained by a “passion for 'noble origin’” and that the image of the aryan represents “at once the 'primordial' Ancestor and the noble 'hero’”, offering a model “that must be imitated in order to recover racial 'purity', physical strength, nobility..” (183). Hitler explicitly committed himself to such acts of imitation when he was portrayed in Nazi propoganda as an heroic knight in the tradition of Parsifal, essentially carrying out his own role-play of fantastic images. A 1938 portrait even pictures him as a

literal knight in shining armour, sitting atop a horse. The meaning of this image is that Hitler, like Parsifal, is come to save Europe, and he is not anonymous as the Knight of the Swan is, because in this portrait his emblem is the Nazi Swastika, flying in the wind on a red flag behind him. In this painting, and perhaps in more aspects of his public life too, Hitler role-played as a hero, and part of the creative process behind this role-play is remarkably similar to Skip's. Both make use of, and play with, recurrent mythological ideas about heroism, specifically those of the knights of the Middle Ages.

Larping, like aryanism, ought to be considered as 'mythical behaviour', which will allow another perspective on the problem of how role-played fantasy worlds like Darkon can relate to the sociopolitical everyday. Eliade offers the idea of mythical behaviour as a sort of classificatory device, a category that by inclusion of disparate practices allows us to perceive how social functions of myth persist in contemporary societies that lack overt, universally shared creation mythologies. His discussion has some commonality with Freud's, as he contends that novel reading – consuming the fantasy-infused work of a creative writer, an artist – is a pertinent form of mythical behaviour because it facilitates an escape. He elaborates on the 'escape from time' that reading provides:

one 'escapes' from historical and personal time and is submerged in a time that is fabulous and trans-historical. The reader is confronted with a strange, imaginary time, whose rhythms vary indefinitely ... a time, then, that has at its command all the freedoms of imaginary worlds (192)

The escape described by Eliade seems more dangerous than the tangential escape from everyday structure that I have described in the SCA. Although it is defined in relation to the everyday, it provides no assurance of a return to everyday rhythms, and perhaps does not intend one. It is also not necessarily communal. Larping provides this dangerous kind of escape wherein the larper, like the reader as well as the child at play, can indulge themselves in a fantasy, imagining a world in which heroism or nobility, not capital, is what determines a person's social worth. Unlike the SCA, larping does not have a precise historical referent, larpers do not aim for an image of the Middle Ages, rather images of medieval fantasy inform the unknown trajectories of their fantasies.

Unlike reading, larping is not fantasy experienced vicariously, rather it is inherently physical and inherently to do with the self. Instead of reading about a hero, a larper attempts to become a hero. In this way larping is more like aryanism: rather than suspending heroism at a distance, larpers like those in Laconia attempt to bring mythological thinking – replete with problematic passions for noble origins and violent conflict – into action through their role-play, they bring it onto themselves and their bodies. They might act like conductor rods for mythological thought.

Considering larping as mythical behaviour provides further ground for understanding it as a pseudo-religious leisure activity. It is mythical not only in terms of its content – its borrowing of characters, symbols, and narrative ideas from archaic and medieval myths – but also in form. It lacks the plays of ceremony and ritual that are characterising features of the SCA, but nevertheless its social organisation takes on mythical aspects. Its activities orbit around images, such as the knight in shining armour, that thus take on something of the devotional, perhaps something of the sacred, and impart a sense of community, of brotherhood. The lightness and whimsicality of *Darkon* and *Monster Camp* mean that it is difficult, when watching them, to grasp how larping may operate in this way, on the serious and dangerous level of quasi-fascistic dreaming. Their respective presentations of larping focus instead on presenting its content and form as pastiche, as a kind of postmodern entertainment.

In fact, discourses of both religion and entertainment can be seen at work collusively in larping. Ultimately, it might function as if it were some combination of elements from church and Disneyland. Larping has an element of 'neoreligiosity', a concept elaborated by Matt Hills with reference to cult media fans, those who display devotional tendencies toward mediated entertainments such as television shows. Larpers are much like fans, as both may be considered 'freaks' because of the apparently extreme behaviours that their interests engender. Hills, like Eliade, is aware that making direct comparisons between historical religious practices and contemporary secular discourses like fandom is an extreme leap of logic (117). He offers the idea of the

neoreligious not as a way of accounting for practices of fandom as religious practices, with fans representing a postmodern religion, but rather suggests that “religious discourses and experiences are re-articulated and reconstructed within the discursive work of fan cultures” (129). I have located in Laconia discourses of devotion, and also of communion; devotion to the image of the heroic knight, and communion in brotherly affinity with others who share that devotion. Given that many larpers are also fans or gamers, the articulation of devotional discourses in larping may consist partly in attempts to re-enact physically the tropes of fantasy genres that are usually experienced in mediated ways, to physically play out filmic or game-based content, imitating the fictional heroes of popular films and games.

One result of neoreligious attitudes identified by Hills is that the figurative space generated in and by the application of these discourses to contemporary practices comes to constitute 'ontological security' and become a genuine means of locating individual identity. With reference to *Star Trek* fans, for example, Hills states “the fan-viewer treats the hyperdiegetic world as a space through which the management of identity can be undertaken” (138). In other words, the imaginary world that is dealt with, be it the universe of *Star Trek* or the realm of Darkon, acts as an engine of identity. This means that for larpers role-playing in fantasy worlds may become inextricably linked to the construction and conception of self in everyday life. That this ontological security which has traditionally been provided by religion and creation myths can now be located in entertainments and leisure activities speaks to a fundamental change in the nature of individual experience. It is obvious what this means for larpers like Skip though: if one plays at being a hero in a heroic world, one can see oneself as a hero, can then ostensibly become a hero, and also be secure in the knowledge of that heroism.

Or, perhaps another way of phrasing this is to say that one can simulate being a hero, and then invoke that simulation as a means of identifying and distinguishing oneself. In this way, larping is an absolute simulation. Baudrillard writes in *Simulation and Simulacra* that “people no

longer look at each other, but there are institutes for that. They no longer touch each other, but there is contactotherapy. They no longer walk, but they go jogging, etc.” (13). Perhaps we could add to this list, 'there are no longer heroes', or 'I am not heroic', 'but there is larping for that'. Baudrillard suggests that Disneyland is a prototype and an exemplary model of the way in which things are thusly reinvented, or one could say, replayed. He describes it as a “space of the regeneration of the imaginary” (13). In this respect larping builds on the model of Disneyland. Like Disneyland larping, in its actualisation of a fantasy world creates an artificial perimeter within which the imaginary takes precedence. Unlike Disneyland, however, it is not a purely geographical perimeter. Larping is not fixed in place, it is mobile and multifarious, a larp can pop up at any time in a school gymnasium or a national park. Wherever and whenever it manifests it creates a barrier, on the inside of which various dreams, histories, myths, and entertainments are regenerated or re-played. In Darkon this regeneration might seek to express – in a social microcosm, through the simulations of role-play, and in the language of a proto-fascist critique – the desires and pleasures of an untainted American Dream that is dreamed throughout the Western world, the spectral lure of freedom. In this way larping holds the same appeal as Disneyland or *Star Trek* or any other media fantasy world designed for entertainment. It embodies the lost heroic pleasures of a modern America, or a Middle Ages, or perhaps some other era or society that never existed, but nevertheless can be replayed after work or on long weekends. The ultimate function of Disneyland, Baudrillard pronounces, is to obscure:

Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America that is Disneyland (a bit like prisons are there to hide that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, that is carceral). Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real (12).

Following this logic might lead to an understanding of larping as an absolute entertainment. Along these lines, it may function to distract participants from the potential for acting heroically in their everyday lives, and even to provide an excuse for being unheroic or passive in the face of immense dissatisfaction with the conventions of everyday life in capitalistic, mediated American society. At

one point in *Darkon* Skip proudly tells his son, “Did you know that Daddy got to be a knight this weekend?” It may be, then, that what he did for the rest of the week is not so important to him, as the imagined order of the role-played fantasy of *Darkon* comes to supersede the 'real'ness of the everyday.

This comparison with Baudrillard's conception of Disneyland may come to a point of exhaustion because although there are functional similarities to be found, larping represents something different and new, and is a critical development in the types of entertainment that are available. The active, embodied involvement of larpers in role-play is at contrast with the physical passivity involved in other entertainments, even Disneyland. The self-activation of a larper's body as a site of meaning makes it different to the body that sits still while playing computer games, and also to the body that waits in line and goes on theme park rides, that submits to vertigo. It plays in a new way. Caillois lists four “fundamental categories” of play – agon, or competition, alea, or chance, mimicry, or imitation, and ilinx, or vertigo (14-27) in *Man, Play, and Games*, and he describes ways in which these categories are combined in contemporary entertainment. The circus, for example, is associated with ilinx and mimicry (137). Caillois, however, does not foresee the combination of mimicry and competition that is found in larping. The simulations of the fantastic role-play and the sports-like competition of the battles enacted in larping are an unexpected combination of elements. It is a combination, however, that is perhaps appropriate for a media-saturated, capitalistic society based on the abstraction of images and hierarchical competition, on the 'divine irrelevance of images' described by Baudrillard (3) and the 'accumulation of capital' described by Marx (279).

Larping is also crucially different to Disneyland because it is not an institution, in the sense that it is not geographically fixed and does not have a singular, permanent base. Larping is sporadic, being carried out at different times, in different places, and by different groups and organisations that are largely unconnected. *Darkon* is a 'realm' and not a 'land'. Larping maintains a permanent

stronghold only in the abstract fields of the imagination and the virtual. This lack of permanence and the flexibility and adaptability it offers larpers might make organisations like the wargaming club miniaturised, decentralised versions of Disneyland. Such small groups and individuals take the power and the desirous offerings of imaginary fantasy worlds into their own hands and utilise them, tactically, to satisfy their individual desires and satiate their fantasies. They operate like cells or sects, and their role-played fantasies demonstrate a kind of insurgence.

As an emergent postmodern entertainment, perhaps larping evidences how the escapist thread thought to be endemic in modern western society, the constant search for distraction, may find new and potentially more thorough ways to infiltrate people's lives and become increasingly essential to their sense of identity, so much so that things like larping might even supplant the functions of traditional myth or religion with their own role-plays.

Returning, momentarily, to the perspective outlines by Freud in *Creative Writers and Daydreaming*, we might freshly perceive how all of the heroism espoused by larpers in *Darkon* is attempted wish fulfillment. The imaginative content of reconstituted myths, histories, and dreams that is evident in the brotherhood of Laconia and represented, in filmic form, in *Darkon* is grown from a groundwork of fantasies that revolve around the achievement of heroic deeds, which Freud suggests are a common theme in male fantasies (147). The masculine ideals of heroism that are made manifest in Laconia could be regarded as a narcissistic expression of an “excess of self regard” that Freud believes young men carry into adulthood from their “spoilt days” as children (147). Freud argues, writing in 1908, that the residue of this self-regard and the fantasies that it bears are usually suppressed so that a young man may 'find his place' in the frameworks of society. Simply put, we grow up and move on. Over a century later, however, in mediated late capitalist western society, larping is exemplary as an activity that denies suppression and gives primacy to these narcissistic expressions, to this desire for heroic deeds and the determination to fulfill them. In larping these desires become engines of identity, contributing to participants' conceptualisation of

self and of the social groups that they create in such a way that the functioning of larping may approach the discourses of religion, while also maintaining a status as entertainment. Paradoxically, the role-play of larping – as a leisure activity – may help its participants to 'find their place' in the world by facilitating an escape, or at least a distraction, from it.

All of this reinforces the problematic way in which larping is held separate from the frameworks of everyday life. It may be that larpers like Skip and the brotherhood of Laconia see heroism and nobility as impossible values, only attainable in the fiction and fantasy of larping, not at all present in everyday life. This may help to explain the impulse towards terrorism that is conveyed by Frank. He identifies with an act that brings personal fantasies to bear on the everyday world. The terrorist act is perceived as revolutionary, as containing within it the possibility or hope of 'striking out' at, and changing the dominant frameworks of the world, restructuring them to bring them into alignment with personally held fantasies. Like the child in play, who re-arranges the world around him in order to better satisfy himself. This, one could argue, is the course of action of those like Anders Behring Breivik, the right-wing extremist who committed a mass shooting in Norway in 2011 because he believed the world needed to drastically change in order to fit with his fascistic vision. Within the frames of reference developed in this chapter, such actions may be seen as the violent infliction of a personal fantasy onto the world. It is apparent also in the ceremonies of groups such as the KKK who, like larpers, costume themselves in order to precipitate their activities.

Breivik's terrorist actions may come to be characterised in history from an ontological perspective that is connected explicitly with fantasy and with role-play, along the lines of a hypothetical scenario offered by Caillois. Caillois describes a situation in which an actor in a theatre leaves the dramatic stage, which is a space of play and fantasy, but continues to play his or her dramatic role. In this situation, he suggests, the actor would have “donned a second, chimerical, and all-pervasive personality which claims exorbitant rights to a reality with which it is of necessity



incompatible” (49). Essentially, Caillois describes a situation of alienation in which an individual may 'lose touch' with reality in a potentially schizophrenic way as the role-played persona overtakes and erases the actual personality of the actor. This is an echo of Freud's suggestion that overindulgence in fantasies may become pathological. In the case of Breivik, debate regarding his potential madness ensued immediately after his apprehension, and there were widespread efforts to pathologise him by describing him as 'sick' or 'crazy'. Perhaps this is because if his insanity were confirmed his actions would be easier to comprehend, his fantasies for a racially pure Europe and the violence with which he inflicted them onto the world could be regarded as a detrimental overflowing of unhealthy fantasies that he lacked the mental faculty to control. As in the scenario of Caillois' actor the boundaries of a fantasy world have been disrespected, and the operative content of that play has spilled over the edges, making an unwelcome incursion into a reality where it cannot function, where it is in fact dysfunctional.

Larping might provide a platform for this kind of transgression simply because it consists of the play-acting of fantasies in close proximity to the everyday. In *Darkon* there is a sequence featuring Skip in which he is accused of confusing the fantasies of Darkon with the realities of his everyday life. This sequence covers a chain of events in which James, a friend of Skip's and a founding member of Laconia, leaves the group prior to a crucial battle with Mordomia in order to pursue his own agenda. Skip understands this in terms of the fantasy world of Darkon and he initially explains the circumstances dressed in-costume, addressing the camera as Bannor:

Unfortunately James didn't really feel part of the brotherhood that we've created in Laconia. It's just sad because I considered him a friend and a brother and a part of the team. I think in the end he was bribed by Mordomian gold and promises of power and glory

Later we see Skip and James together. It is night and they are at a Denny's restaurant, arguing while they eat. Here, they are wearing ordinary clothes and are not role-playing their characters. James tells Skip that he wanted to leave the group on good terms, but Skip does not distinguish between their relationship within the fantasy world of Darkon, where they have role-played as allies, and

their friendship in everyday life. It seems to the viewer that Skip feels betrayed, and has precluded the continuation of his friendship with James. He says, “I don't feel like there is in character and out of character when it comes to this”. James replies, speaking slowly and elaborating each syllable as if talking to a child, “it's a game. It's not reality”. Here, Skip tries to hold those around him accountable according to the terms of his fantasies played out in *Darkon*. He sees James's actions as unheroic and dishonourable. The fantasy world of *Darkon* seems to have primacy for Skip, and this has caused an impasse in his everyday life. Caillois describes his hypothetical situation as a “fatal deviation” (49) and, although the consequences may not be as severe as they are in the case of Breivik, a transgression of the line between fantasy and reality has occurred, with detrimental results.

Such a fatal deviation is, for Caillois, an instance of “the corruption of games” - specifically, the corruption of mimicry. At the outset of *Homo Ludens* Caillois revisits Huizinga's ideas on play, quoting the same short passage that I do in the first chapter of this thesis in relation to the SCA. While Caillois corroborates much of Huizinga's definition of 'the formal characteristics of play', he also problematises parts of it. Larping, too, complicates Huizinga's optimistic ideas about play. In particular, Caillois takes issue with Huizinga's suggestion that people at play surround themselves with secrecy. He contends that secrecy “cannot be part of the definition of play”, which he argues is instead “nearly always spectacular or ostentatious” (4). The larpers who feature in *Darkon* and *Monster Camp* are complicit in making their play into a spectacle, as they become film actors. However, in the commentary of the film provided with the DVD release of *Darkon* it is revealed that many members of the wargaming club were reluctant to appear on film and were suspicious that the film might humiliate them. This may be because they are, as Freud suggest adults should be, ashamed of their grown-up play and their fantasies, and afraid of them being made public. Perhaps there is a contradiction in larping; it is the outcome of a desire to play-act fantasies in a bodily way that is inherently performative, but it is carried out with the knowledge that exposure of

the operative fantasies may lead to larpers being considered childish or undeveloped. Larping is characterised by both secrecy and ostentation. Caillois also takes issue with Huizinga's suggestion that play is "action denuded of all material interest" because it fails to take into account profitable games of chance, such as those found in casinos (5). Larping is not a game of chance, but it is inextricably linked with material interest. We learn in *Monster Camp* that NERO is a franchise. This means that people who want to start a NERO chapter have to buy a franchise license from an owner. Further, in order to attend a NERO event one has to pay a fee. Larping, like the SCA, is also an activity that can only be undertaken with investment of considerable material resources. Players need to invest in costumes, weapons, and transport, among other things, as well as have sufficient free time weekends. As such, it is essentially a middle class pursuit. It is play, but not the innocent and virtuous play that Huizinga describes. It is the play of adults and it carries in it the attendant problems and dangers of the contemporary adult world: entanglement with the capitalistic orders that it sets itself against, contradictory impulses of ostentation and secrecy. Larping contains many risks for fatal deviations.

Larping, like the SCA, is a kind of play. It is based on fantasies. It shares with the SCA a yearning for an imagined medieval society, and plays out the heroism that such an era connotes. It imagines the heroism, adventure, and magic of this fantastic era as a counterpoint to contemporary everyday life, but it is a counterpoint that is much more violent, competitive, and ultimately more dangerous than that offered in the SCA. The ideals of heroism played out by Skip and others are much more individualistic, and perhaps more unstable than the ideals of chivalric nobility found in Southron Gaard. They can be the outcome of efforts to remedy personally held dissatisfactions, and in the case of Skip, they might represent an individual search for power or glory rather than a feeling of belonging. As such, the role-play of larping is more an extension of the anxieties of contemporary life than it is a remedy for them.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### 'Lord of the Rings Tour'

I sit in a moving vehicle watching a small screen. It is suspended from the roof above me, and on it plays a dvd with the title 'Quest for the Ring' which functions as an introduction to the stories in and of J.R.R. Tolkien's novels as well as Peter Jackson's filmic representations of them. Narrated by an exuberant male voice with a thick American accent, it features 'behind-the-scenes' footage of director, cast, and crew at work as well as interviews with some celebrity actors and important production and design staff. Fast cuts are spliced together with the repeating sounds of camera shutters and swords clashing, audible through small speakers positioned throughout the vehicle. Outside the window immediately to the right of my seat the Rakaia river snakes towards the Southern Alps of New Zealand's South Island, snow-capped under a clear blue sky. It is a picturesque landscape. The vibratory hum of rubber tyres rolling over the scenic highway is distinct through the chassis of the vehicle, a customised Toyota Landcruiser, a 6-wheel-drive off-road bus. I am a passenger on the flagship excursion of Christchurch based Hassle-free Tours, 'Lord of the Rings Tour'. As my gaze shifts between the small screen and the large window Sir Ian McKellan's voice tells me "Middle-earth is a real place, and it's New Zealand".

The branded identity of New Zealand and Tolkien's fictional Middle-earth have been entangled in the collective unconscious of popular culture since film crews began a kind of takeover of rural New Zealand in 1999. Over a decade later, the film crews are gone, but their presence has left intangible traces on New Zealand's landscapes, histories, and contemporary social frameworks. In the wake of the film trilogy's successes, it is often suggested that New Zealand is the real Middle-earth. McKellan is echoing this popular sentiment and also acknowledging New Zealand's unique predicament. This convoluted doubling of New Zealand and Middle-earth seems to be the essence of 'Lord of the Rings Tour'.

The suggestion that New Zealand is Middle-earth implies a kind of role-play, wherein New Zealand plays the role of Middle-earth. In many ways all of the enterprises connected to *The Lord of the Rings* operate on this level, implicitly connected with the playing out of Tolkien's fantasy world in the literal and figurative spaces of the real world. In the tour, the instance of role-play that is the basis of this chapter, the experience of live role-play is flattened. It is made virtual as well as physical as screens are a primary feature, they suspend fantastic images in the space before me, holding them always just out of reach. This is the flatness of a fantasy experience constructed in order to be consumed, it is commercialised and capitalised. Role-play here is an act of consumption. I have paid to be in this vehicle, and the product of the tour has been created, for me, by someone else. It is polished and professional, does not have the clumsiness of Darkon with its boffers or the spontaneity of Southron Gaard.

The tour follows a route from Christchurch, westward across the Canterbury Plains, to Mt. Sunday in the Rangitata valley, which doubled as Edoras, the fortress city of Rohan. It is a journey away from civilisation, towards the wildness and danger of the mountains. It crosses the same geographical terrain that Jackson and his crews of actors and technicians did when filming, and also mirrors the journey of the Hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings* who leave the comfort of The Shire and traverse the Misty Mountains. Many stops are made along the way in Canterbury to appreciate and photograph scenic vistas but the destination is Edoras, a place of fantasy. Or rather, what's left of it, as all the set buildings were dismantled shortly after filming ceased.

By tracing the journey of the tour in this chapter I will aim to explore the resonance of Middle-earth in New Zealand and to discern the ways in which the heroic quest of Tolkien's fellowship and the task of Jackson's film crews may become enmeshed, and then re-played or role-played in the recreational trip of the tourist. When New Zealand is considered the real Middle-earth the geography of the entire country is potentially made into an environment for the fantasy role-play of the visitor. The tourist here could become a hero of their own quest and simultaneously a pilgrim

to Jackson's industrial quest, following in his footsteps and making every site and sight share in their vision of New Zealand as Middle-earth.

In this vision New Zealanders may, somewhat problematically, come to be considered the real Hobbits. In Tolkien's books and Jackson's films these bucolic creatures are shown to be good at heart and to enjoy a slow pace of life in a semi-rural setting, an image that fits well with popular conceptions of New Zealand as natural, unpopulated, and leisurely. However, Hobbits can also be ignorant, small-minded, greedy, and childish. They are fearful of the unknown world and are susceptible to corruption by evil powers. Tolkien makes this evident in the character of Gollum, a Hobbit gone wrong, made reprobate by the One Ring, and a persistent shadow to the reluctant heroism of Bilbo and Frodo Baggins. The One Ring itself is a fictional talisman of evil that has been recurrently interpreted as symbolic of insidious capitalism and corruption of the self. A slim conceit of this tour might be that the Hobbits are inviting visitors into their fantastic realm, offering up a slice of their life. As the visitors enter, shadows begin to fall and subtly manipulated layers of doubling and simulation become apparent. New Zealand and Middle-earth are made quest-able, but their meanings are made questionable.

The kind of role-play that occurs on 'Lord of the Rings Tour' is insinuated in the way it is customarily advertised – in pamphlets and online – with images of tourists who stand and hold weapons – axes and swords, replicas of those in Jackson's films. These tourists look directly into the camera lens from atop an anonymous summit where, behind them, green and brown valleys stretch out, becoming tall grey mountains and pale blue skies. The weapons and the landscape backgrounds – as much a feature of the images as the people are – are contrasted with modern civilian clothes and the composed enthusiasm of snapshot smiles. The fantastic and the mundane collide. In the coercive language of advertising these images seem to state that by purchasing a journey on 'Lord of the Rings Tour' one can take the place of these tourists, simultaneously interpolating oneself into the seductive landscapes of New Zealand and the epic imaginative of Middle-earth, momentarily

simulating the mountaintop heroism of Gandalf or Aragorn in photographed role-play. Although these tourists stand together in some images, they do not acknowledge each other and there are no battles staged. These props are purely ornamental, not made for interaction. This role-play seems, unlike the SCA and larping, to be solitary rather than communal, carried out in virtual isolation between each individual and the camera.

My own journey – quest or touristic excursion – as a researcher begins as I wait on Papanui Road, one of Christchurch's arterial routes, for the vehicle that will transport me to Middle-earth. I have arranged with Hassle-free Tours, over the phone, to be picked up outside a hotel. When the vehicle arrives, two guides step out to greet me, their names are Steve and Hammond. Usually tours are given with only one guide, but Steve is a trainee and is therefore accompanied by the more senior Hammond. I get in the vehicle, sitting in the front row of seats, directly behind them, and we drive on to pick up the next members of the group. Around a few corners, we stop to greet a middle-aged couple, who are also from New Zealand. Hammond says that not many New Zealanders come on these tours, so it is a little unusual for him that there are three of us on this trip. When we begin driving again, we are asked if we are fans of *The Lord of the Rings*. I diplomatically answer yes, but mention that there are many things I find problematic about it. The man answers that he is a fan, but is emphatic that it is primarily because of the photography and filmic technology involved. I had assumed that the question concerned Tolkien's books, but his answer obviously refers to Jackson's films. This could indicate that the films may be foremost in the minds of clients of the tour, or else that the books and films – separated by decades and in many ways very different – are blurred together in public perception, comprising one entity, a single phenomenon, a franchise. The woman replies by telling a brief story about how she had never heard of Tolkien's writing until her husband encouraged her to read it during their courtship. It seemed that he wanted to downplay his enthusiasm for the imaginative or fantastic implications that his presence on the tour might have, to downplay his fandom and, perhaps, his own desires.

Discourses of fandom in general, as well as the religious aspect of fan culture, pervade all tourism connected to *The Lord of the Rings*. Henry Jenkins states in *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers* (2006) that what separates fans from other consumers of media is that they not only view media but “translate that viewing into some kind of cultural activity (41). This tour specifically provides a platform for turning either a viewing or a reading, or both, of *The Lord of the Rings* into a physical excursion through geography. When he outlines the underpinnings for studies of fandom Jenkins, citing the *Oxford English Dictionary*, points to religious attitudes by noting that the modern word 'fan' is an abbreviation of 'fanatic' which denotes “certain excessive forms of religious belief” and “worship to any 'excessive and mistaken enthusiasm’” (1992, 12). Comparison of fans cultural activities to religious attitudes and discourses has since become a recurring theme in the study of participatory cultures, exemplified in Hills' ideas of neoreligiosity, which I have already applied to larping, and will also have relevance here. Although it is alleged to be a “blindspot” of media theory (Hoover and Venturelli 1996, 251), it is made explicit in *The Lord of the Rings* and is an important facet of this tour. Although my fellow tourists did not bring a fanatic attitude to the tour, it can be seen as an expression of the religious or pseudo-religious currents of media consumption because its shape is remarkably similar to that of a pilgrimage, a journey undertaken in imitation of a sacred figure. In *Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks*, Ethan Gilsdorf describes a trip from the US to New Zealand, motivated by his own fandom, that takes the form of a pseudo-religious pilgrimage. He admits that he “idolizes” Peter Jackson and describes lesser technicians who worked on the films as “minor deities in any film geek's pantheon” (245). Gilsdorf does not write about Hassle-free Tours' product, but his accounts of other *The Lord of the Rings* tourism experiences indicate similar tendencies: journeys to key locations featured in the films, using props and costumes to imitate scenes or characters from the films, divulging of exclusive information about the films, and discussion with other fans, perhaps culminating in a feeling of communion with the book and/or film. *The Lord of the Rings* tourism seems to aim for the religious by evoking pilgrimage in the



form of imitative role-play.

The fantastic nature of *The Lord of the Rings* itself means that it may be easily co-opted into pseudo-religious processes. As a text and a media object, it is saturated with borrowed mythological ideas. Jane Chance describes how Tolkien, the linguist, attempted to create “a mythology for England” by “drawing on the extant languages and literatures in Old and Middle Englishmen, but also on those languages that influenced the cultural and historical development of Great Britain” (2). With this as the story of its formation, Tolkien's novel may be considered the result of his own mythological 'poaching'. He borrows ideas from sources such as Norse sagas and medieval romances in order to piece together his own mythology long before Jenkins develops his ideas in relation to contemporary media of fans as 'textual poachers' who “raid mass culture” in attempt to “integrate media representations into their own social experience” (18). Tourism such as this, in a converse way, promises to provide a social experience of role-play that is based on Jackson's films, which are a media representation of Tolkien's novels.

I have already discussed how Mircea Eliade suggests novels fulfill a function of myth. With the aid of a novel, such as Tolkien's, “one 'escapes' from historical and personal time and is submerged in a time that is trans-historical” (192). Such an escape is implied in the social experience of tourism, and can also be the object of pilgrimage. According to Victor Turner, “the pilgrim seeks temporary release from the structures that normally bind him” (1978, 9) and aims for something of the liminal, arriving at the liminoid or “quasi-liminal” (34). Turner also states that “a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist” (20), himself acknowledging the inexorable intertwining of pilgrimage and tourism. Tourist trips made by fans to locations where television shows or films have been made are an established kind of fan activity. Matt Hills, for example, writes about X-files fans who travel to Vancouver in a chapter titled “Cult Geographies” (144-157), which

alludes to the religious nature of such trips, citing Turner and also Dean MacCannell, perhaps the foremost scholar of tourism. *The Lord of the Rings* based tourism represents a new development, though, and is remarkable because the entire country of New Zealand is co-opted into its vision, the sheer amount of options available to tourists is unprecedented, as is the number of companies offering specific packages such as this one that include an invitation to imitate media in role-play. In an effort to define this emergent kind of cultural activity, Hills' idea of the neoreligious is again useful:

It does not simply indicate the collapse of religion into privatised expressions of faith or sentiment (Berger 1967) or the cultural relocation of something essentially described as 'religion' (Luckmann 1967). Instead, religious discourses and experiences are re-articulated and reconstructed within the discursive work of fan cultures (129)

Larping reconstructs devotional discourses, and so too does *The Lord of the Rings* tourism in New Zealand. Specifically, it reconstructs the discourses of pilgrimage. This tour is a neoreligious pilgrimage and its tourists are neo-pilgrims. Their role-play is a retracing and re-enactment of fantastic media.

The textual poaching and neoreligious pilgrimage of fan cultures are both encoded in the promise of this tour, however, my companions thus far do not seem to conform to any preconceptions I hold about fans of *The Lord of the Rings* or fantasy in general. Compared to fans like Gilsdorf, members of the SCA, and the larpers of *Darkon* and *Monster Camp*, they seem extremely reserved in their appreciation of *The Lord of the Rings*. Perhaps this is because the tour itself is not the work of fan cultures, but rather the work of a corporate entity that seeks to capitalise on fandom.

The next pick-up point is on Riccarton Road, another arterial route, and as the vehicle skirts the edges of Christchurch's central business district and the adjacent Hagley Park, Steve begins to narrate our trip with facts and anecdotes relating to the colonial history of the city. He speaks to the group from the driver's seat, with the use of a headset

microphone that amplifies his voice through the roof-mounted speakers. He mentions the earthquakes that, months earlier, damaged many of the buildings in the central city, and the police cordon that now prevents passage through it. Prior to the earthquakes, these tours began in Cathedral square, near to the cathedral outside which the Wizard has spoken. The cathedral is the symbolic center of colonialist Christchurch, an emblem of colonial Anglicanism and Neo-Gothic architecture. Steve's discussion focusses on the difficulties faced by settlers who came over the Bridle path – a steep track over the hills from Lyttelton, the port where the settlers disembarked from their ships – and sought to establish a town in the middle of a swamp. He explained that the city was “planned from a desk somewhere in England” and that the park was intended as a geographical mirroring of the central business district. Many of the city's central roads are named after prominent Englishmen and settlers. The inheritance of colonial impositions is at work in Christchurch, therefore, on a literally pedestrian level; in the workings of the everyday.

It is at this moment, early in the tour, that the process of creating equivalencies between everyday New Zealand and fantastic Middle-earth can first be put to work as a kind of critique, or at least a way of problematising things. Tolkien created Middle-earth as a kind of mythological prehistory for the England of his time, perhaps as a way of giving order or coherence to a world that was being rapidly changed by industrialisation. A letter of his is quoted by Chance, in which he refers to the “poverty” of an England that “had no stories of its own (bound up with its tongue and soil)” (3). The place of hobbits in his mythology is widely conceived of as symbolic of or sympathetic to (but not quite allegorically substituting) an Oxfordshire lifestyle that is parochial, pre-industrial, and focussed around agriculture. If New Zealand is the locus for projections of Middle-earth fantasies, then of all its localities, it is Christchurch more so than other cities that may be given some kind of equivalence with The Shire and the Hobbits. Although this equivalence

wasn't mentioned directly, dialogue about the settlers of Christchurch emphasised the city's 'more English than the English' reputation and gave rise to an image of Christchurch as a continual, concrete manifestation of nostalgia for a lost England. This may be the same strain of nostalgia shared by Tolkien and made similarly manifest in his fictional Shire, which belies his desire for a victory of the provincial and agricultural over the completely industrial and his idealisation of the Oxfordshire style of life. It may be that in Christchurch, and in fact the South Island, these are the things that have been celebrated about Jackson's filmic retelling of Tolkien's stories, while other centres such as Wellington may focus their celebrations and praise more on Jackson's rise as a tycoon of the culture industries.

Christchurch, in particular, lends itself to becoming a setting for role-play of Middle-earth.

Christchurch has something of a fascination with origins that has equivalence in the fictional Middle-earth. In Christchurch one finds locals who speak with a British accent despite their families having been in New Zealand for many generations, and in many social settings there is a great deal of importance and class-based prestige attached to the school or schools that one attended during youth. Visible connections to origins in England are often regarded as indicators of high social status or 'good breeding'. An important crux of *The Lord of the Rings* is Aragorn's noble ancestry. It is his blood, his breeding, that gives him the right to rule as King. The fact of his nobility is kept secret until very near to the end of Tolkien's story when his identity as heir is revealed and he ascends to the throne, ushering in an era of peace and prosperity, and providing a satisfactorily optimistic denouement. This fascination with origins can be seen as problematic, however, because Tolkien's mythology verges on the fascistic; his world is, in a way, predicated on race-based nationalism. In Middle-earth and in Tolkien's stories social roles are determined by ancestry and race. It is the Hobbit's destiny to live quietly in a civilised corner on the edge of the map, while it seems that all dark-skinned creatures are condemned to be evil and

live under the ground or high in the mountains. If we are to play out this aspect of Tolkien's fantasy it seems we may encounter the same sorts of dangers that arise in Darkon.

The resonance of these Oxfordshire aspects of Middle-earth in Christchurch's cultural heritage continues along these lines. It is interesting to note that when compared with other urban centres in New Zealand, Christchurch is known for having less residents of Maori or Pacific Islands descent. The Shire too, as a preserve of a slowed-down rural lifestyle, is far from being a cultural melting pot. In 'The Lord of the Rings' the Hobbit protagonists return to their Shire after their quest is completed, only to find that it has been overtaken by the wizard Saruman, who has destroyed and outlawed all that they hold dear, and turned the land toward industrial production. It is critical that Jackson's films do not include this portion of Tolkien's story. In his retelling The Shire is preserved, unspoiled and unsullied, much like the image of untouched New Zealand. Instead, Jackson includes a premonition, a brief and savage dream sequence experienced by Frodo in which orcs are pillaging the Shire. This is a vision of a future in which the parochial paradise is overrun and destroyed by dark-skinned, foreign creatures. In some ways, Christchurch's whiteness makes it the ideal real-world double of The Shire. But xenophobia may be an issue in not only the fictional Middle-earth, but also the 'real' one. Tolkien's books offer a symbolic opposition to the onslaught of industrialisation, but this comes with a fear of things outside a particular parochial framework. In Jackson's films this fear is made obvious, and given the face of the dark-skinned creatures, the fallen race, an underclass. These fears find root in Christchurch, and are softly alluded to when the contemporary cityscape and its colonial history are made into a display, viewed through the window of our moving vehicle and narrated by our tour guide, made to play fantastic roles.

Steve pulls over across the road from a motel. Both guides step out to greet a pair of young Japanese men who step into the vehicle. As we continue to drive, the city outside the window begins to transition from the commercial-residential suburb of Riccarton to the more industrial Sockburn, and eventually to the open fields and the pine-tree rows of provincial Canterbury. Our next stop is in Rolleston. On the outskirts of this satellite town not far from Christchurch we stop outside a Bed and Breakfast accommodation to pick up the final member of the group, a middle aged Australian woman. With the group complete, the guides make a collective welcome that is slightly more formal in tone than anything they have said thus far, and present a laminated piece of card displaying information regarding safety. The processes of travel – similar to the welcome and safety briefing one receives from airlines – properly inaugurate our trip. Our destination, Mt. Sunday, was mentioned for the first time here, with the addendum that it is “now known as Edoras, of course”. Intimation of the doubling process that occurs in the case of Mt. Sunday/Edoras subtly casts the entire trip as a fantasy adventure simulation. The muted suggestion here is that we, the tour group, are now much like the fictional fellowship of the ring who, after being formed at Rivendell not far from the Shire, set out on a quest towards the mountains. Our own role-play begins.

The vehicle rolls onward past low barbed wire fences that, seen from my interior viewpoint, are blurred by motion. Behind this blur sits an expanse of brown and green paddocks that are sometimes delineated by rows of Radiata Pine. The Southern Alps slowly become visible, emerging from the blue vapor of distance. Steve continues to narrate the journey, and as we leave the urban environment for the rural his topics change. Discussion is now primarily about agricultural practices, which are traced back to the time when Canterbury was settled. We learn, for example, that grass was introduced to New Zealand only to feed the sheep that been previously introduced, but would not eat anything

native. Pine trees, too, were introduced in order to create shelter for animals. Natural history is thus made to begin with introduced species of flora and fauna. We learn of the current ecological threat posed by possums, an unwelcome introduction. And also of the rapid, recent rise of dairy farming, which is a severe drain on the region's waters, and has caused the removal of many shelter belts so as to enable large mechanised irrigation arms to move across paddocks. This is more of the kind of information that can easily be made relevant to Tolkien's England, on the cusp of industrialisation. It suggests that the early settlers constructed an ideal world in Canterbury, bringing with them those English things that they desired. In more recent times, though, dairy farming represents an industrial attitude that imperils the pleasantly provincial. Contemporary industrialism plays the role of the evil character, a threat to the idyllic fantasy of New Zealand.

Shortly, there are two very brief stops. Firstly, very close to a major fault line where a road was dramatically skewed during the earthquakes mentioned earlier. Secondly, on a promontory overlooking the Rakaia river. These stops constitute the first manifestations of a procedure that is repeated at many points throughout the tour; taking photographs. Everyone steps out of the vehicle and wanders around it, directed to a particular view by the guides; here the pronounced kink in the road and the sight of the river, receding towards the Alps. A short preamble is given, like a premature caption to the imminent images, and the guides offer to take photos using tourists' own cameras. When all are satisfied, we get back in the vehicle and continue.

These stopping points seem somewhat arbitrary to me, but they are framed as essential by the guides. Perhaps, in some way, they are a necessary part of an pilgrimage-like excursion such as this. Turner states that “when the pilgrim advances towards his ultimate sacred goal, he tends to stop at every major way station, there to do penance, pay his devotion, and prepare for the holy climax at the central shrine” (22). These stopping

points can be seen as waystations of scenic landscape. Our penance is the act of taking a photograph, and perhaps more importantly posing for one. Our devotion is made explicit in the images that will be produced and reproduced virtually. Our anticipated holy climax will come atop Mt Sunday, or Edoras.

It has been argued that film location tourism is an enactment, or re-enactment, of a kind of colonisation. Ryan Reynolds argues that in the case of *The Lord of the Rings* location tourism, because sites are unmarked any similar area may be “co-opted into the tourists' fantasy projection” in such a way that is “inherently dramatic or performative” (7). By this process, the Rakaia river may come to play the role of any river in Middle-earth, even one that is not featured in the films, and – at a stretch – the Greendale fault may even be seen as a sundering due to some malign magic. In the same way that religious or ritual performances can transform ordinary spaces into sacred spaces, thus changing their meanings, Reynolds suggests that this kind of tourism has enduring transformative power. This, he argues, “goes beyond cultural imperialism to some as-yet-untheorised form of neocolonisation in which the natural environment itself – the landscape – is appropriated in a very real way” (7). Reynolds' arguments suggest that in late capitalism, and particularly in the last decade which has seen an increase in widespread and rapid circulation of images, the motto for travelers 'take only photos, leave only footprints' is an impossibility, or that perhaps in taking a photo one might in fact be robbing an actual place of something, or rather, robbing it of its meanings. As we tourists climb back into the vehicle, cameras in hand, perhaps we have been party to an act of oppressive appropriation, but one whose machinations are very subtle. Our guides have said nothing to suggest that the view lying before us, now etched into our digital archives, is anything but the Rakaia river, but in our minds it might become The Anduin or The Brandywine, a scenic feature of our fantasy role-play.



When the drive resumes following this stop the 'Quest for the Ring' documentary is played. With narrative exposition, interviews, and 'behind the scenes' footage, the movie functions to properly introduce both Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* novels, and Jackson's films. The sonorous, accented voice of the narrator styles Middle-earth, along Tolkien's lines, as a "Europe that existed in a dark age" and emphasises some of the ostensible differences between the real world and the fantasy one. Notably, it alludes frequently to the heroic and chivalric tenets of Middle-earth, a place where "victory will depend on intangible weapons" such as courage and love.

The DVD introduces the idea and the image of Peter Jackson to the tour group. We are informed that in attempting the unprecedented venture of filming three motion pictures simultaneously he "took up his own quest" and he is created, therefore, as a kind of hero figure. The critical enmeshing of fiction and reality in simulation is clearly at work in the case of Peter Jackson. This enmeshing occurs widely in New Zealand. Deborah Jones outlines this process from an academic perspective in a chapter titled "Ring Leader: Peter Jackson as 'Creative Industries' Hero". Aside from his association with the fantastic heroes of his films, she argues that he has become figured as an "exemplary New Zealander" (94) because he embodies a particular combination of "both creativity and entrepreneurship" in order to become "the 'new' New Zealander who is a global player while staying at home" (98).

The physical appearance of Jackson on the small screen marks a turning point in the journey of the tour. Pictured in action, directing actors on-location, Jackson's physicality, grooming, and style of dress mark him as different to other filmmakers operating on the international level. He is not very tall, but is quite round, he has tangly, longish hair and an unkept beard, he wears thick glasses, and seems to favour shorts over long trousers. His rotundity, hairiness, and relaxed dress style mark him in two connected

ways. Firstly, as resisting the glamourisation process associated with Hollywood. Secondly, as being quintessentially hobbit-like. Helen Brown, a newspaper columnist, writing after Jackson's third film dominated the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences awards ceremony, claims that “one of the great delights was to see how LOTR [sic] people refused to conform to the Hollywood plastic surgery, makeover cliché. Peter Jackson wasn't shabby chic. He was just plain shabby” and also describes him as “the hairy filmmaker from the land of myths and mountains”. This land, of course, could be either New Zealand or Middle-earth, but perhaps is both. Perhaps his constantly reinforced proximity to the fantastic, as a signifier for both *The Lord of the Rings* and for New Zealand, has led to him becoming partially submerged into it. In Jackson himself, in the site of his body and the sight of it on a small screen in a vehicle travelling on the Methven Highway, there is a collusion of the 'authentically' New Zealand, the capitalistic, corporate Hollywood, and the fantastic allusions of Middle-earth. He is the star of this tour, and plays the role of our hero.

Jackson's filmic endeavours and their contiguous cultural phenomena have created a complex set of cultural circumstances. The experience of being part of a group of tourists, watching a small screen in a vehicle moving across the picturesque landscape views of South Canterbury embodies many of their problems and pleasures. The subjective feelings of being a passenger in a moving vehicle are certainly familiar. Michele De Certeau suggests that inside a train carriage, imprisoned in a seat, one endures “the immobility of an order” where “rest and dreams reign supreme” (111). The windowpane that separates the passenger from the world outside functions as a disjuncture that “makes our memories speak or draws out of the shadows the dreams of our secrets” (112). One enters into a physical stasis where all the senses except sight are arrested. In this state one can become enlivened in other ways – emotional, intellectual, psychological – by the

barrage of landscape images that seem to roll past, while one is in fact rolling past them. Perhaps waking thoughts are brought down, closer to the subconscious. This is a peculiar experiential modality generated by visual experience of landscape, and it is much like that provided by films, where establishing shots often depict landscapes as a way of drawing the viewer into their own particular orders, their internally coherent worlds of fantasy. The oblong shape of a windowpane is obviously similar to that of a film screen, and so might be the feelings experienced when one gazes at or through it. In the tour vehicle there are two screens – the glass window to the outside, and the led monitor on which the documentary plays. Both operate as windows, allowing a view of a fantasy world that, for all its pervasiveness and multiplicity, is always suspended just beyond the immobile passenger.

De Certeau's insinuation that this modality of viewing is one of incarceration is at a problematic contrast with mainstream expectations of cinema and of fantasy genres, which are most often – as in the case of those larpers featured in *Darkon* – conceived of as an escape from the constraints of everyday life. That which we believe to be emancipatory may, in fact, be incarcerating, just as Baudrillard suggests Disneyland is “presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real” (12). Here, the imaginary of Middle-earth is expanded to cover all of New Zealand, the imaginary and the real coincide geographically. This fantasy world does not have strict borders, entry queues or parking lots as a theme park does, nor even the transitory borders of the SCA or larping events, so allusion to incarceration may not make immediate sense. However, the physical passivity necessitated by a duration of time in a passenger seat may be felt as a kind of incapacitation or restraint. Any urge to actually enter into the landscape, to experience it in a tactile or olfactory way, is prohibited, and the landscape itself is continually incarcerated, always made into an image in an oblong frame.

The tour, and perhaps all of the cultural paraphernalia accompanying Jackson's films, relies heavily on this feeling, this peculiar experiential modality. Perhaps not surprisingly, it is one that Jackson himself has some familiarity with. He unintentionally alludes to its power when he describes his first encounter with Tolkien's writing:

Eighteen years old and reading J.R.R. Tolkien for the first time, I was sitting on a train as it left Wellington and rumbled up through the North Island. During the twelve-hour journey I'd lift my eyes from the book and look at the familiar landscape – which all of a sudden looked like Middle-earth. That was over twenty years ago. Since then this story has ceased to exist for me as a work of fiction, instead it has become an account of an extraordinary passage of time. (6)

This is the beginning of his foreword to 'The Lord of the Rings Location Guidebook' by Ian Brodie – a guide to locations in New Zealand, that were used as film sets by Jackson – a book that exists as another portal for tourists into the instance of New Zealand that is simultaneously Middle-earth. His transformative, transporting experience augurs his career as a filmmaker, as well as the tourism industry products spawned by his films. From its adolescent beginnings, the vision of Middle-earth engineered by Jackson has been native to New Zealand, and at its center has been the imaginative act of transposing elements from Tolkien's fictional world into images of rural New Zealand. It is imaginative faculty that creates the links between one's own fantasies and the fantasies of the screen – landscape or fantasy genre film. The tour offers itself to fans and tourists as an opportunity to indulge this faculty, in a particular experiential modality, by subjunctively roleplaying a quest, much like the ones undertaken by Tolkien's fellowship and Jackson's cast and crews.

Almost immediately after this documentary finishes, the vehicle speeds past the town of Methven. As we pass we are informed that the cast and crew of *The Lord of the Rings* stayed in this town during filming and that their daily journey to the film set was on the very same road that we ourselves travel on. Steve and Hammond place great emphasis on this fact, adding that the actors were also transported in off-road vehicles. They also discuss some of the difficulties faced by the actors: long work days in arduous conditions

that began incredibly early because of complex make-up sessions. Their comments effectively echo the idea that Jackson took up a quest, giving it further prominence by making the cast and crew play the role of his fellowship. Associating our journey with that of Jackson and his cast and crew intimates that our journey on the tour is also a quest. From this point onward the similarity of our trajectories is mentioned frequently.

Ryan Reynolds astutely sums up the similarity of the quest in Tolkien's saga to touristic excursions by suggesting that both the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* and the tourist experience consist of “a fantastic departure from a bourgeoisie quotidian existence” and “a journey across a strange and unfamiliar landscape, a tireless battle where the most daunting foe is geography” (4). This is, essentially, the form of most storied journeys. It is the familiar shape of Joseph Campbell's monomyth, in which “a hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder” (30). This shape – the departure, the trials, and then the return – is also found in pilgrimage practices, which are undertaken in imitation of a religious hero and can, therefore, be understood as a kind of role-play. Victor Turner describes how a Christian pilgrim “puts on Christ Jesus' as a paradigmatic mask, or persona, and thus for a while *becomes* the redemptive tradition” (10). Coming from a position not dissimilar to that of Turner, Dean McCannell argues for a connection between tourism and the religious, stating that “tourist attractions are precisely analogous to the religious symbolism of primitive peoples” (2). This is what is at play when the process of 'Lord of the Rings Tour' is made to resemble that of the cast and crew as well as, in turn and by proxy, that of Tolkien's fellowship. The paradigmatic mask of the questing hero is, unbeknownst to our group of tourists, perhaps without our own volition, slipped on over our heads in a devotion to all that is symbolised by Peter Jackson and *The Lord of the Rings*. This is an example of how the tour, functioning as role-play, doesn't so much 're-stage' any part of the filming process or Tolkien's fantastic narrative, but

nonetheless coerces us to replay them, to fulfill already scripted roles.

The next stopping point for the tour is Staveley. We are encouraged to purchase a cup of coffee and some morning tea and given an opportunity to make ablutions in this small town. The cafe where we disembark is situated at the roadside, across the road from it there are no buildings, only the expanse of pastures. There is no trace of industry here. Two seemingly local pakeha men sit under a verandah. They wear woolen socks and flannel shirts, their muddy gumboots have been removed and placed near the door. Slowly, they drink tea from cups and read a newspaper. Through the frame of simulation and role-play provided thus far by the tour they become unwittingly exhibited as exemplars of rural New Zealand, and it almost seems that they resemble hobbits, indulging in second breakfast in the sun outside their hobbit hole.

During this break, sitting at a picnic table in the sun, I am able to talk with Hammond, the senior guide. To begin with, I ask him questions about the role of the guide. According to Hammond, each guide working for the company operates differently, having their own favoured topics of discussion. Although they do tours independently, he suggests that their combined knowledge is like a collective resource from which they draw material to suit their own background knowledge and the interests that might emerge from a group on any given day. Each guide is given a degree of flexibility, he tells me, but they are instructed to follow a general format: while in Christchurch, they should talk about Christchurch, and then while on the plains of Canterbury, they should talk about the plains. This means that *The Lord of the Rings* does not begin to feature strongly in their discussions until they near the mountains, adding to the way in which our journey is comparable to the of Tolkien's hobbits who do not know quite the nature of their quest until they get farther from the Shire, farther from home, and farther from the familiar.

Hammond tells me that on this tour, while Steve has closely followed this format,

his discussions have heavily favoured colonial history. Hammond's own preference is to include more discussion of Maori history. As the tour continues, however, he does not make any references to pre-colonial New Zealand. The absence of Maori from this tour is conspicuous, and it begins with Jackson's films. Stephan Turner and Misha Kavka argue that *The Fellowship of the Ring* “does not have Maori in it; rather, it has a dread figure standing in where Maori might be” (235). This figure is Lawrence Makoare, the Maori actor who plays Lurtz, one of the evil Uruk-hai created by Saruman. He is renowned for playing villainous Maori characters in the New Zealand films *What Becomes of the Broken-Hearted* (1999) and *Crooked Earth* (2001). In the third film of Jackson's trilogy Makoare returns to play two other evil roles; the witch-king of Angmar and Gothmog, a leader of the orcs. Although both of these characters are voiced by other actors, Makoare's body becomes a reference point. Turner and Kavka argue that his frame, covered in prosthetics, make-up, and costume, signifies “the dense absence of Maori in a virtualised landscape” (235). The Maori – in absentia – are also associated with the fearsome, the barbaric, and the evil. In Jackson's films there is a montage in which the dark-skinned Uruk-hai are born from the soil inside the mines of Isengard, a nativity which suggests an ultimate connection with the land, but also an ultimate degeneration: the Uruk-hai are below even flora and fauna in the natural order, they are literally of the dirt. They also wear facepaint that is faintly suggestive of Maori facial tattoos. The tour does not make any reference to Makoare or Lurtz or the Uruk-hai, let alone the Maori whose place they might take in the cascading virtual versions of New Zealand that are conjured by *The Lord of the Rings* films. If a version of New Zealand is to be able to simulate Middle-earth, then it may be only a thoroughly postcolonial version in which fear and distrust of dark-skinned natives is already implicit. The suppressed xenophobia that has been read into Tolkien's Middle-earth is thus not only expressed by Christchurch or any other singular location in

New Zealand, but is re-encoded by the process of the tour itself, which cancels out anything pre-colonial in its creation of this virtual version of New Zealand. In the role-play of this tour the only role available for Maori seems to be that of the evil, earth-bound creature.

This re-creation of New Zealand's heritage seems to be a confirmation of much of the academic discourse that has followed Jackson's films. The dominant argument that emerges from books and articles published in the years following the release of the films centers around the thought that a process of (re)inscription has occurred. In this process New Zealand's unique landscapes, myths, and histories, are overlaid or overridden with the tropes of Middle-earth, but more significantly with those of Hollywood, of tourism, and therefore with the pronounced discourses of late capitalism. This is part of the 'neo-colonisation' described by Reynolds. Turner and Kavka allude to overlay when they paraphrase coeval advertising language to suggest that "the New Zealand of LOTR is both the magical land of Middle Earth and a tourist paradise, a composite graphic where one map slides easily over the other" (230). This conceptualisation echoes the sequence at the beginning of *Darkon* in which the CGI map of a fantasy continent is visually layered overtop of a suburban street and both are present, simultaneously, in the frame of the film. The coexistence of New Zealand-as-New Zealand and New Zealand-as-Middle-earth is further explored by Stan Jones in an article titled 'Fixing a Heritage: Inscribing Middle Earth onto New Zealand'. Here Jones cites Thierry Jutel, who suggests that "the landscape of New Zealand has come to represent a transposable 'otherness'" and that the nation "offers its land as a commodity, which inscribes in it the forces of the global economy" (286-287). In actuality, tourism ventures are a second offering of New Zealand's land and landscapes to the global economy, the first offering having been made to Hollywood. In this offering New Zealand is figured as a *tabula rasa*, an ideal blank surface onto which



fantasy projections can be made. Jones concludes that what is on offer is “a virtuality” that begins with a physical referent but depends on recursion to one's own memories, anticipations, and imaginings related to the Middle-earth saga (298). The specific offering made by the tour is the chance to enter into those projected fantasies via role-play. The frame of the tour, conceptually – as a guided voyage to a destination that exists in fiction – as well as literally – the glass windows through which we have thus far seen most of the land – supports this virtuality above all else.

This dominant idea of (re)inscription, having been developed almost contiguously with the releasing of *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, seems somewhat tentative. Perhaps it is a first response to the ubiquitous presence of the franchise in New Zealand during filming and the three year period that the films were released over. The continued presence of film crews in New Zealand as well as celebrities in local media, films in cinemas, and merchandise in shops may have, at the time, felt like an invasion or, indeed, colonisation.

The tour's recourse to colonial history does not seek to prove that there was in fact a presence (histories, mythologies, connections with the land) in place prior to *The Lord of the Rings*, rather it reinforces the imagined idea that, as tourists, we are stepping onto a tabula rasa, into a pristine place. This is the virtual place, the image of New Zealand-as-Middle-earth constructed by forces of media and capital. Referencing the colonial era so heavily conjures a kind of frontierism into this image. In the picture-perfect, Edenesque landscape tourists can act as colonists, but because the indigenous has been erased there is a pretense that they might also act as Adam, discovering God's (or Tolkien's, or Jackson's) perfect creation for the first time.

When we return to the vehicle and recommence our journey Hammond takes the headset microphone from Steve and, sitting in the passenger seat, reveals his complicity in the *The Lord of the Rings*. He tells us that he works for Hassle-free on a part-time basis,

but his “main source of income” is the film industry. He is a sound recordist and has worked with Peter Jackson on *The Lord of the Rings*. He talks for some time about his personal history in the film and television business in New Zealand, telling us about working with Jackson on two of his earlier films, *Heavenly Creatures* (1994) and *The Frighteners* (1996), which were also both shot in New Zealand. When referring to Jackson he always uses his first name. Hammond becomes the ultimate insider, a genuine link to the New Zealand film industry, to the processes of *The Lord of the Rings*, to the celebrities of the cast, and most importantly, to Peter Jackson. The idea of Peter Jackson is expanded by the tour guide's ensuing dialogue, and thus the sociocultural consequences of his endeavours are deepened. Hammond's stories about Jackson and his crew are frequently exemplars of what Kristin Thompson has described as “the P.J. approach: just do it!” (308). The P.J. approach is a variation of the 'number 8 wire' mentality – a methodology, employed typically by New Zealand males, that embraces improvisation, adaptability, roughness, and flexibility – that is applied to filmmaking.

Hammond's stories divulge 'insider information', making us feel closer to the filmmaking enterprise of Hollywood and to the heroic figure of Jackson himself, but they do so in a manner that is a potent contrast to the narration offered earlier via the documentary. Hammond is casual, talking slowly, pausing often, and sometimes chuckling quietly. His voice and his stories offer something seemingly quintessentially or authentically New Zealand, apparently a foil to Hollywood. He tells us that he has won two Academy Awards for his work, and describes his multiple trips to the awards ceremonies. Thus he, in much the same way as Jackson, comes to exemplify a 'creative industries hero' of New Zealand. Thompson suggests that one of the many benefits of filming *The Lord of the Rings* in New Zealand is that local film crews and production units have undergone an “upskilling” and their work has been brought up to 'international'

standards (303). There may be a danger, however, that Thompson's observations signal another kind of colonisation and that despite the valorisation of Jackson's uniquely New Zealand approach, local knowledge and methods may not be valued or seen as valid in comparison to those of Hollywood. In this, perhaps, the pervasiveness of Hollywood may be extended and solidified. There seems to be a latent tension between 'the P.J. Approach', with the casual character that it implies, and the slick, glamour obsessed, competitive Hollywood. Jackson's physical appearance is an expression of this tension. After the success of his trilogy of films he lost weight and underwent something of a 'makeover', becoming significantly less shabby. His large, thick glasses disappeared, and his hair, while still messy, became much shorter. Despite largely conforming to Hollywood standards, Jackson and *The Lord of the Rings* are still widely seen as being an alternative to them. Jackson's appearance hovers over this tour like a religious icon. It is in worship and imitation of him that this pseudo-pilgrimage is carried out.

After a few minutes silence, soundtrack music from *The Lord of the Rings* is played through the vehicle's soundsystem. The music is not announced by either guide but, sitting directly behind them, I am able to see Hammond select a cd from a folder and put it into the player that is part of the dashboard console. The stirring of the strings does not seamlessly segue here, as it is in the darkness of the cinema. It doesn't cancel out the other auditory input, but accompanies the crunching of the tyres, which now traverse a shingle road. Nevertheless, the music calls on my memories of the films and books as well as my own desires and fantasies of heroism and magic. It plunges us deeply into the modality described by de Certeau, inviting us into the simulated world of the films. We are now much closer to the mountains. The green pastures of the Canterbury plains have been left behind and outside the vehicle are the larger, browner, expanses of tussockland.

Agricultural structures are scarce, and instead dark rock formations litter the view through

the window. Having replaced the earlier narration, which related in some way to the landscape we encountered, the music serves to conjure the virtuality of New Zealand-as-Middle-Earth, to submerge us into a simulation of medieval fantasy.

As we round a corner, a view of the Rangitata Valley opens up and we first glimpse our destination. Stopping for a photograph, we stand on the dusty shingle road and Hammond reveals a blue folder. He holds it up to show us still images taken from *The Two Towers*, the film which features Edoras. The images in the folder are much bluer, having been subject to postproduction and CGI augmentation, and are contrasted with the raw vista before us. Before we take photographs we play a game in which we try to pinpoint virtual locations from the folder in the real landscape, making the virtual correspond to the actual. This is like a test to ensure we are familiar with the setting and the way each part of it comes to play a specific part in the role-play of New Zealand-as-Middle-earth.

We speed down into the valley, making only one more stop. An empty lodge provides a final opportunity for ablutions before we summit the mountain. While the others go inside to explore I observe Steve loading a familiar collection of replica weapons – several swords, an axe, and a staff – into a compartment at the back of the vehicle. These are the weapons featured in the advertisements promoting the tour. Minutes later the off-road part of the trip begins. We turn off the shingle road onto a rutted track, Mt. Sunday looming closely. Hammond describes how the mountain looked during filming. He invites us to imagine The Edoras set, which I remember well; a collection of wooden, thatched-roof buildings with a giant hall sitting on a bank of stone at the center. We are told that an access road, travelled by trucks with building materials and then by off-road vehicles carrying director, actors, and camera crews, led up one side of the mountain. This is the route that we will take, traveling all the way in the footsteps of Jackson.

After fording a river we begin our ascent. We drive most of the way to the summit,

stepping out of the vehicle to make the final part of the journey on foot. The replica weapons are extracted from the vehicle and distributed around the group, we are encouraged to carry them to the top ourselves. This supports the idea of role-play. Carrying such a prop makes it easier to imagine oneself as a hero of Middle-earth. There is a quick safety briefing. It is very windy so we are instructed to not go close to the edge of the mountain, where there is a sheer drop. We are also instructed to walk in a group, staying together for the sake of safety. This, too, can be seen as an invitation into role-play, as it supports the idea that we are a kind of fellowship. We are given more information about the filming process. Some plants were extracted prior to set building so they could not be damaged, then later repositioned using GPS technology and replanted in their precise positions. The unaltered, pristine, state of the land as well as the uniqueness of the flora is made important. But this highlights the fact that in order to create conditions in which a fantasy world be built, what lived there previously, what was in fact native, was removed. Almost as soon as we begin walking we fail at our instructions entirely, as one member of our group lags behind and nobody, except for Steve, waits for her. In this instance the collective tour group fails at playing the role of the fellowship.

Upon reaching the top of the Mountain Hammond again reveals the blue folder. We gather close to him, standing in a semi-circle between craggy rocks, in order to hear his voice over the wind. During this conversation we are asked to imagine that if the set structures were still in place, we would be standing in the stone base of the great hall. We are shown images of the set, both still shots from *The Two Towers* and behind-the-scenes photographs. The former locations of the various buildings are pointed out. We are also shown images of the surrounding valley as it appeared in the films, virtually augmented to feature the fictional fortress 'Helms Deep'. These images facilitate the imaginative act required to conceive of this hill as Edoras, rather than only Mt. Sunday. They connect to

the films by functioning like a hyperlink, through which the imagined prehistory of Tolkien's Middle-earth can be brought to bear on the valley before us.

There is a startling similarity between the way this folder and its images are deployed here, and emergent virtual technologies that are put to use in imagining the architecture of urban environments. Of particular relevance is an application for smartphones developed by HITLab at the University of Canterbury called CityViewAR. Developed following the earthquakes that caused the demolition of many buildings in Christchurch, CityViewAR allows people to “walk around the city and see life-sized virtual models of what the buildings looked like on site before they were demolished, and see pictures and written information”<sup>11</sup>. The models are displayed on the screen of a person's handheld device, and when the device is moved the application “uses the GPS and compass sensors ... to enable virtual information to be overlaid on live video of the real world” (hitlabnz.org). Both offer instances of virtual overlay, however the hi-tech digital nature of smartphone or tablet devices is an evolution from our guide's folder, which is dusty and bent at the corners. The smartphone application allows people to imagine or re-imagine the city of Christchurch as it was before earthquakes destroyed it, while the folder assists us to imagine or re-imagine the town of Edoras as it has been in Tolkien's novels, Jackson's films, and as a film set. What is provided in both instances is a nostalgic augmentation, an external memory that is visual in form and makes some other time coincide with the present. The virtuality of New Zealand-as-Middle-earth is not yet hi-tech, but it is nonetheless sophisticated and complex.

Once the virtuality of Middle-earth has been asserted via these images it is time to take photographs. This is a most crucial point in the tour where the invitation into role-play is made obvious, as everybody is offered a chance to pose with the replica weapons.

Everybody accepts, taking photographs of each other and then asking Steve and Hammond

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<sup>11</sup> <<http://www.hitlabnz.org/index.php/products/cityviewer>>. Accessed 24 Mar. 2012.

to take photographs, which the guides do obligingly. The weapons are replicas of Aragorn's sword, Gimli's axe, and Gandalf's staff. There is also a large flag of the Rohirrim that lashes about violently in the strong wind. Hammond shows some of us how to hold the flag so that it will look best, and not blow away. In this moment the tour fulfills the promise of the images that advertise it. As they pose, each individual in our group can come to occupy multiple roles simultaneously, thus moving through layers of reality, simulation, virtuality, and potentially myth, attaining a kind of lateral omnipresence through role-play. For the culminating moments of this tour they become at once tourists, fans, pilgrims, and perhaps also heroes of some abstruse quest. These moments can occur only with the insistence and encouragement of the guides, who offer repeatedly to take photos and give instruction on how to pose. Nobody in our group takes their fandom to a level comparable to fanaticism; no famous lines from the film are recited, and their facial expressions while they pose are generally the smiles of acquiescent tourists, not imitations of the rugged grimaces worn by heroes as they raise their swords. The man who, at the start of the tour, had professed to enjoy *The Lord of the Rings* primarily because of its technical merits, expresses the most enthusiasm here. He is photographed, by his partner, holding each of the weapons in turn, and then holding various combinations of the weapons. He does not smile, but his full expression is difficult to discern, as he wears wide, dark glasses. Once enough photographs are taken we make the trip back to the vehicle. I hold one of the replica swords as we walk. It is quite heavy, and I balance it on my shoulder. My gait changes; feet falling far apart, hips almost swinging, my pace is smooth. I stride. I have come to imitate the sword-wielding human hero of Tolkien's world, Aragorn, who is known to the Hobbits for a time only by the name 'Strider'.

Back inside the vehicle, we are insulated from the wind as we drive back down the mountain, retracing our route back to the lodge, where we eat lunch. We sit together at one

table while we eat. Hastily, we devour filled rolls and chocolate cake while drinking champagne or orange juice. Conversation is sparse and awkward, and during this meal the conceit of the tour comes undone. Up to this point the tour has insinuated that we might, by going on a journey together, and in imitation of the cast and crew of *The Lord of the Rings* and the fictional characters they represent, come together on a human level and form a fellowship of our own. Such a grouping, a band of pilgrims, are according to Turner, “an expression of the *communitas* dimension in any society, the spontaneity of interrelatedness” (32), and it is the *communitas* dimension that is missing so crucially as we sit, eating, with very little to discuss. Its absence exposes the effort that the tourism framework goes to in order to replicate its conditions. Our coming together has been manipulated, manufactured, and coerced by a capitalist framework. Rather than coming together to fight a common enemy or to conduct a task too large for any individual, as with the fellowship in Tolkien's stories, our interrelatedness is reducible to the fact that we each paid a sum of money to the same tour company. In this way the tour, as a commodified experience, is a frame; a shape or a shell that without a unified grouping of people has no inner life, no potential for spontaneous *communitas*. Perhaps, if the tour were taken by people who share a stronger devotion to *The Lord of the Rings*, then this may be possible. They may properly take up its invitation to role-play and act as a fellowship.

Returning to the vehicle to drive back to Christchurch the dialogue between the guides and the group is significantly more relaxed, unstructured and informal. We talk together about family histories and heritage but, ironically, Hammond pauses conversation in order to play more film music. As the vehicle climbs out of the Rangitata valley, passing the place where we stopped to survey it only hours before, he lapses into a different way of talking. Slowly, in a low, recitational tone that is markedly different to his conversational speech, he bids us to “say goodbye to Edoras” as he places a CD into the dashboard player.



The song is 'Into the West' – sung by Annie Lennox, with lyrics written by Fran Walsh – which played during the credits at the conclusion of Jackson's third and final film, *Return of the King*. There is imitation of Jackson's films in our denouement, too. Upon its finishing, Hammond tells us the story behind it. A young filmmaker who was dying of cancer was frequently a guest at filming locations, coming to know the cast and crew, but he died before the release of the first film. Walsh wrote the words as a way of saying farewell to this young man when he died. They are deliberately ambiguous and metaphorical, and are also meant to apply to the characters in the film, who leave Middle-earth on a boat. Played now, the soft voice of Annie Lennox and gradually swelling string arrangement plunges us into a diegesis of pure sentiment, enveloping us and re-engaging our passivity as viewers and consumers of fantasy. We are made to feel that it applies also to us as we begin our return journey, away from the virtuality of New Zealand-as-Middle-earth, but its presence in this instance shows we are still entangled in layers of simulation, the role-play endures.

The trip back to Christchurch does not take long. We stop only once, in Staveley again, and not for long. Unlike on the journey towards our destination, there is no point in stopping. Our quest and pilgrimage is complete, and therefore the only thing left to do is to return home. I am dropped off in the same place that I was picked up from, having made the journey to a location that is key to New Zealand's ability to seemingly become Middle-earth. This journey is not a religious one, and perhaps it is not even properly quasi or pseudo religious either, but it is shot through with intimations and imitations of religiosity. New Zealand's role-play as Middle-earth is sophisticated. As the setting for this tour it becomes a neo-religious network that sprawls over geography in the same way that small polystyrene balls cover the face or body of an actor who works with digital motion-capture. Locations act as transformative reference points, waystations that enable

recourse to the history of New Zealand and of the filming process, as well as the fictional world of Middle-earth. The sublime vistas of these locations anchor the network and the journey through them is made as much through screens and virtuality as it is through physical geography. They are sites for celebration and devotion, as well as imitation of revered figures like Peter Jackson, who, with recourse to the medieval fantasy of Tolkien's saga and to colonial-era New Zealand, come to embody and define contemporary notions of heroism.

## CONCLUSION

### *There and Back Again*

Crouching in the dark I pulled aside the edge of a black curtain to peer beyond it into a dungeon. I saw a middle-aged woman trapped in a cage, being harassed by two goblins. She held something out in front of her, as if to warn them away, and spoke firmly, “get away from me, you foul creatures”. The goblins hissed and spat back at her, dancing around the cage and raking it with their long metal fingers. The resulting sound, savage and clanking, silenced her. When the goblins talked their words were slippery and guttural. They didn't enunciate their vowels. The black shapes of their bodies moved quickly in the dark, bow-legged and low; they shunted the wheeled cage into the far corner of the room. The space around the woman's head was illuminated by a small electric candle that she held in one hand and I remember her greying hair that stuck out from under her hooded cloak. In actuality she was an audience member, although not in any conventional sense, because she was also a role-player. This is what happened during *There and Back Again*, a Christchurch Free Theatre performance based on Tolkien's novel *The Hobbit* that I worked on as an assistant director. The experimental theatre performance played over three nights in late 2008 at Old Queen's Theatre in Christchurch, only a block away from where The Wizard's public performances took place.

This thesis, like *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, and many other fantastic stories, ends with a return to its starting point – Christchurch. Perhaps also, as in Joseph Campbell's monomyth, it ends with the ultimate realisation of a newfound “freedom to live” (238). In this case, with the exploration of an alternative way to fulfill the desires of medieval fantasy and role play, a way that might attempt to be more socially engaged and more self-aware.

I have examined in this thesis the development of several forms of entertainment, leisure activities that all involve the acting out, in live role-play, of ideas and images based on creative re-imaginings of medieval societies. I began with The Wizard in Christchurch, ventured to Waipara

with Southron Gaard and the SCA, then shifted focus to look at larping groups in the USA via documentary films *Darkon* and *Monster Camp*, and returned to New Zealand (with Hollywood) to Hassle-free Tours' 'Lord of the Rings Tour' in Canterbury. The emergence of these activities, beginning in the 1960s and continuing over the last half-century, can be seen as indicative of some of the shifts that contemporary Western culture has been, and is still, undergoing. If we proceed from Roger Caillois' suggestion that "the destinies of cultures can be read in their games" (35) then perhaps we can decipher, from these role-plays of adventure and magic, some lines of our own cultural trajectory. Perhaps we can come to understand the nature of our fantasies and how they inform and effect the politics of our everyday lives.

As new forms of entertainment, these live role-plays of medieval fantasy all demonstrate first and foremost a tendency toward simulation and mimicry, which Caillois defines formally and simply as "the desire to assume a strange personality" (44). It appears, from the examples that I have analysed here, that such desires are widespread, and that they may even be emblematic of our current era. The strangeness that we seem to desire is given specific form in fantasies of the Middle Ages: the rigid comfort of feudalistic social organisation, the heroism of sword-wielding knights and kings on the battlefield, and the brotherhood-like bonds of armies and questing fellowships. These fantasies all serve to fill voids in our personal lives. They are responses to perceived deficiencies and can function as wish fulfillment. For the groups and individuals that I have discussed in this thesis the activity of assuming an alternate personality in order to play out these fantasies is a reaction specifically to the seemingly amorphous social organisation of contemporary Western societies, to isolation and alienation, and to feelings of having no control and no power to shape our own individual or collective destinies.

The significant problematic of activities that involve playing out these fantasies, which I have explored especially with regard to larping, is that they can sometimes lead to a cognitive separation of fantasy from everyday life that can potentially be detrimental, even dangerous, in a

schizophrenic manner. In order to play out these fantasies people create secondary fantasy worlds as settings, mapping them out and giving them names like Lochac, Darkon, Laconia, The Shire, Middle-earth, and so on, so as to make them seem real. They then create secondary selves as characters who live in these worlds. Such personalities are divorced from their everyday selves by a sharp dividing line. They are personifications of the strangenesses that are so desired, and that are seen as impossible in everyday life. Reconciling fantasy and the everyday or ordinary life can be difficult and problematic, but their sharp division might make it hard to live satisfactorily or happily.

Seen over time, the emergence of the fantasy role-plays that I have examined may represent a movement towards corporatism and other capitalist discourses, towards virtuality, towards individual experiences, and away from the communal. This chronological progression may be connected to the recent history of Western society, as well as its immediate future. In this way the SCA prefigures both larping and 'Lord of the Rings Tour'. It presents a unique phenomenon which is then made more problematic by subsequent manifestations of similar tendencies. The means employed by the SCA to play out their collective fantasies are co-opted in larping and, to an extent, in 'Lord of the Rings Tour', and are made to function within capitalist rubrics. The founding of the SCA in Berkeley in 1966 locates it near to the centre of hippy counterculture and student-led radicalism that dreamed of overthrowing power structures and changing the nature of everyday life. It is present now in Christchurch in the form of Southron Gaard which, rather than seeking to overthrow everyday life, stages a retreat from it in favour of the agrarian space of the Canterbury Plains. This space becomes the setting for its large-scale medieval role-play, its re-enactment of a feudalistic kingdom. Larping, as exemplified here with The Darkon Wargaming Club and NERO, carries out a similar retreat. It does so, however, in persistent reference to media and mediated images. The live role-play of larpers is made in imitation of recurrent images, found in films and computer and video games that are consumed by participants. In *Darkon* their role-play is even re-

made into such images, as larpers become actors in sequences that mimic the conventions of genre films. Further, while the SCA groups across the world are all, in their official forms, not-for-profit organisations, larping groups such as NERO operate as franchises, and can be bought and sold by owners who might individually profit from them.

'Lord of the Rings Tour' is a business venture operated by a corporate entity, Hassle-free Tours. It also stages a journey away from the city and Suburbia and across the Canterbury Plains. It is, however, a journey to the virtual destination of Middle-earth, perhaps the most famous and profitable fantasy world to have been created, which is widely familiar from books and films that have been sellout successes. The role-play of this tour is figured by the constant presence of virtual technology in the form of screens that encourage participants to turn their focus inward, away from the tour group. This tour is very much a millennial creation, characterised by its overt entrepreneurial agenda and integration of media technology that supplants spontaneous human interaction. It is keyed in to the nature of life in current technological and political climates. The ways in which we role-play our fantasies of the Middle Ages are changing, perhaps in conformance with wider social changes, or perhaps even in augury of them. They evidence a progression toward those things that they are initially staged in opposition to: capitalist discourses, mediation, isolation, and potential alienation.

In this regard, *There and Back Again*, as an experimental theatre performance, can be seen to have offered an alternative way to role-play medieval fantasy, and perhaps even a halting and reversal of this progression toward corporatisation and virtuality. It was an attempt to create circumstances wherein one might be able to fulfill the desire to assume a heroic medieval fantasy personality in a different way. Entrance to the performance was made via a narrow alleyway between two buildings where the audience stepped through a small side door and into a lobby. Inside this lobby each audience member was stripped of their shoes and put into a darkened elevator. The performance orchestrated a disappearance from ordinary life and from the city in a

disorienting way, as each audience member became much like Alice, falling down the rabbit hole and into a strange, unknown world. When the elevator doors opened they found themselves in a re-created hobbit hole, a circular room that was made to resemble an alpine hut or rural cottage in New Zealand just as much as a den in the fictional Shire. The room was filled with things that would have been familiar to the local audience: sheepskin rugs, a tin of biscuits, a bottle of Watties tomato sauce, Marmite, and Minties. A map of New Zealand was hung on the wall, along with a portrait of former Prime Minister Michael Joseph Savage, who is known for his attempts to transform New Zealand into a more egalitarian society by instituting social welfare. The fantasy world of *There and Back Again* did not simply facilitate an escape from ordinary life in Christchurch and New Zealand. It was filled with clear references to the everyday world, and to the politics of audience members' everyday lives.

Revisiting my memories of the performance several years on I am drawn particularly to the ways in which the actors addressed the audience directly, inviting and at times forcing them to participate, to role-play. The first part of the performance mirrored *The Hobbit*. In Tolkien's text Gandalf and a gang of dwarves invade the home of Bilbo, the titular hobbit, convincing him to leave with them and join their quest. In the performance the audience were made to play the role of the hobbit. Actors playing a wizard and two dwarves entered into the re-created hobbit hole and began to ask questions of the audience, who had to provide answers. The actors then sung and performed magic tricks before singling out the audience, one by one, and sending them through a door, giving them each a hooded cloak and a candle – a costume and a prop – that confirmed their status as role-players, and as the protagonists of a role-played quest. By casting the audience members in the role of the protagonist *There and Back Again* fulfilled the suggestion that New Zealanders have become the real hobbits. It also granted fulfillment of the desire to assume a strange personality. It did so, however, without granting control. The role-play of the audience began prior to their entrance into the fantasy world, with the removal of their shoes which made

them resemble the perennially barefooted hobbits. They were cast without their immediate consent or understanding. Because they entered into the performance space prior to the actors, however, they were given time to assimilate their surroundings and, perhaps, to realise their position. While they had crossed a threshold by entering the performance space, that threshold was not the sharp dividing line of mental fantasy, and their role-play within it was not the playing out of their personally held fantasies.

The point in the performance when each audience member stepped through the door of the re-created hobbit hole marked, for them, the departure. This is the first step of any quest or journey wherein, according to Campbell, “the individual is drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood” (51). In *There and Back Again* these forces were manifested in the architecture of the performance environment. Each audience member made their way, alone, through a labyrinth of tunnels that led to a series of rooms or enclosures. The tunnels were designed as a multi-sensory obstacle course that included tree branches, ramps, and other landscape features that had to be negotiated. Inside the rooms the audience encountered actors playing the assortment of evil creatures that Tolkien's fictional heroes come up against; trolls, goblins, a spider, Gollum, and a dragon. From the comparative comfort of the re-created hobbit hole the audience stepped out into an interpretation of Middle-earth. The version of Middle-earth that they inhabited during the performance was not the flattened, virtualised environment of 'Lord of the Rings Tour', with its vast landscape imagery and sentimental soundtrack. It was instead a dark, claustrophobic version, much more like the various underground passages and dense tangles of foliage that Tolkien describes in his novels – 'tight' and frightening places such as the caverns under the Misty Mountains and the forest of Mirkwood.

The audience members often had to crouch and crawl through the performance environment, interacting tangibly and sensorially with the setting of their role-play. Removing their shoes prior to the performance had a two-fold purpose: as well as helping to make them into role-players, it



helped make them aware of their surroundings in a tactile way. As they moved through the labyrinthine environment the audience walked over grass, dirt, sand, pine needles, through water, and onto soft fabrics and mattresses, feeling the sensations of each on the skin of their feet. They also encountered the scents of these things, as well as other familiar smells like cinnamon, fish, and lavender. These tactile and olfactory stimulants were conceived of in opposition to the way that in contemporary society the visual is privileged over other sensory perceptions. They worked to create a setting for role-play that encouraged an immediacy of physical experience, in contrast to the passive modality of watching that is prevalent in the contemporary entertainment industry – films, television, computer and video games – and was reiterated so thoroughly during 'Lord of the Rings Tour'. This emphasis on tactile experience also may have facilitated a return to the playfulness that is so often attributed to children, not via mental regression or wish fulfillment, but by tactile involvement with the world. Audience members had to interact with the world around them much in the way that small children do. They became like children playing in the dirt. The performance environment was conducive to a different kind of play.

The world of *There and Back Again* that the audience entered into was the product of a critical analysis of Tolkien's texts. In Tolkien's Middle-earth there are very few female characters, and in *The Hobbit* there are none of any significance. It was suggested by the director, Peter Falkenberg, that in Tolkien's world femininity is sublimated into the landscape and manifested in the fearsome creatures that inhabit it. This was thought to be particularly evident in Tolkien's ultimate creature, the dragon Smaug, a kind of serpent, an animal that has symbolic values connected with fertility and sexual desire. This psychoanalytical reading of Tolkien's text informed the role-play environment, which was conceived as a kind of female body. The final tunnel that led the audience to their encounter with the dragon was made to resemble a bodily passage; a birth canal. In this way the performance conformed, rather blatantly, with Campbell's suggestion that mythical journeys include an episode of rebirth in which the hero is "born again" (91). All of the

creatures encountered by the audience were played by female actors, and the dragon was represented by a pole-dancing woman, a clear representation of sexualised femininity. The actor playing the dragon confronted the audience members, reversing their gaze.

The absence of female characters in Tolkien's fictional world, and the prevalence of feminine qualities in the landscape and fauna (both which exist only to be conquered by male heroes) was seen to suggest a latent fear of femininity. Because this interpretation was made into the topoi of the performance environment (the setting for role-play), entering into the fantasy world meant engaging, to some extent, with political issues of representations of femininity and male desire. Many audience members evidenced a level of confoundment after their encounter with the dragon, so they were not necessarily led to critical analysis, but they were drawn into relationships with real political forces. The fantasy world here was not simply for escape from everyday life, rather, it offered a political engagement with it.

*There and Back Again* created a live role-play environment in which Tolkien's fantasy world was made subject to a critique. Audience members may have initially been out of their depth, disoriented, and drawn into relationships that they did not rightly understand, much like Campbell's hero setting out on a journey. But for them the act of role-playing such a journey involved taking steps toward analysis, and perhaps attempting to understand the forces they were subject to. In this way live role-play may be able to provide a way of negotiating or re-negotiating one's relationships with one's own fantasies. The world of *There and Back Again* was not rational, and entering into it meant losing rationality as well as control. Role-playing within it was not an act of wish fulfillment or an attempt to make sense of the world by satisfying personally held desires or compensating for lacks in everyday life. Rather, it provided the possibility for role-play to become an investigative act, a way of trying to understand the world.

All the examples of live role-play of medieval fantasy that I have looked at in this thesis are engaged in processes of re-imagining and replaying. They re-imagine, replay, and reconstruct the

Middle Ages, using them as the malleable substance of mental fantasies. Darkon and 'Lord of the Rings Tour' are exemplary of the way that already existing media can be reconstructed by live role-play, they co-opt already existing fantasies, seeking to make them more 'live' by replaying them physically. These processes are not limited, however, to repetition and reiteration of conventions and clichés. They do not have to be processes of retelling what we already know about life, even when what we already know about life is not satisfactory, as they so habitually seem to be. Live role-play of medieval fantasy can involve recontextualisation, interpretation, analysis, and critical thought. Carried out thoughtfully it could be a way of posing problems and asking questions of both everyday life in the contemporary Western world and the fantasy worlds that we routinely create in opposition to it.

*There and Back Again* staged an individual journey for its audience, a role-play undertaken in isolation. Because of this it was different to the large-scale, collective role-play of the SCA and larping, as well as the staged fellowship of 'Lord of the Rings Tour'. Its ending, however, was constructed to provide a communal resolution. This ending came, for each audience member, after their encounter with the dragon. Making their way through a final dark passage, they would emerge into the re-created hobbit hole from which they had initially departed. In actuality this was a different room, but it was decorated with the same familiar items, made to look identical. Here, the audience was offered tea and biscuits, the opportunity to eat and drink together. They could talk with one another and members of the production group. Not all of the audience members wanted to do so, in fact some wanted to return to their everyday lives as promptly as possible. They were obliged and escorted down several flights of stairs, back to the door in the alleyway where their journey had begun. Those who remained, however, had an opportunity for reflexivity and dialogue. They were outside of the performance frame. Their role-play had ended, but they had not yet returned to the everyday. They were able to discuss their role-played quests, to share their experiences with others and perhaps to collectively process the performance prior to returning to

their everyday worlds. This may have allowed them to take something with them as they returned. Perhaps newfound knowledge, provocation, disturbance, or even insight.

From my position behind the black curtains that demarcated the performance space I peered into the fantasy world of *There and Back Again*, observing the role-play interactions that took place between actors and audience members. For the several nights that the performance took place I was a voyeur, watching over and over again as the actors who played goblins danced around the cage. Because of the darkness it was sometimes hard to see the faces of audience members, but when I could I glimpsed an array of reactions. Some appeared genuinely frightened. Others were wide-eyed and wore grins. They seemed excited, perhaps happy. The woman whom I watched stand up to the goblins was one of these. I remember a conversation that I had with the actors after this encounter. They admitted to being surprised and unsure of how to treat the woman, but said that her speaking back had given them energy. Not only had it broken the repetition of the performance (the actors had to play out their scenes between thirty and forty times each night), it had driven their own role-play forward and given them a sense of aliveness. Hidden in the darkness I felt that I was privy to moments of raw interaction, that I was witnessing something powerful and true and precious. These interactions had not collapsed into something to be consumed, or dissolved into images and simulations.

In many ways the position that I have taken throughout this thesis is similar to my position behind the curtain. I have observed the activities of others from a distance, at times coming closer to enter into fantasy worlds myself, to do my own role-play. Perhaps I have been in search of this raw interaction and this aliveness, something real to break the repetition of the everyday. It remains aloof, like the modern dream of the Middle Ages, a dream of freedom.

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