



Review of The Bloomsbury Companions to Contemporary Film-makers: Peter Jackson

María Seijo-Richart, M.Seijo-Richart@leeds.ac.uk

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Book Review

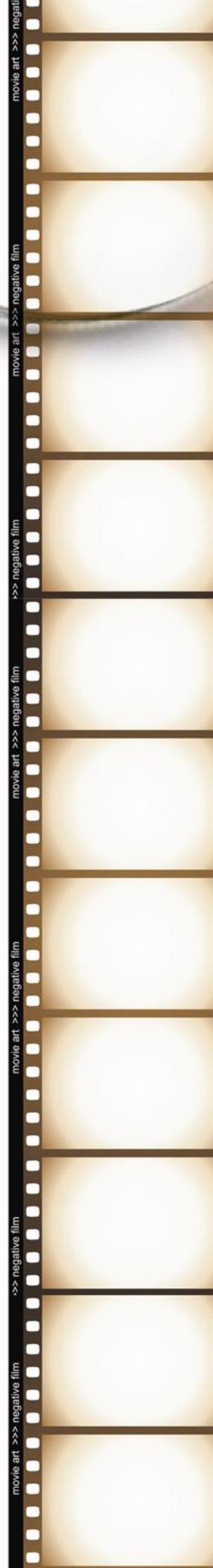
Alfio Leotta, *The Bloomsbury Companions to Contemporary Film-makers: Peter Jackson*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. xi + 285 pp. ISBN 9781623566531, \$134.99 (Hbk)



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Review of The Bloomsbury Companions to Contemporary Film-makers: Peter Jackson

Alfio Leotta's new book aims to analyse Peter Jackson as "auteur", his double status of New Zealand and global filmmaker, and how his work has contributed to put his homeland on the map. This promising premise is marred by an unsatisfactory, fragmentary structure, which gives the impression that the book was completed hastily. It has four chapters, followed by a dictionary-like mishmash ("A-Z Films/ Themes/ Key Concepts"). Some sentences appear twice. Leotta introduces people and films (i.e. Andy Serkis, the mockumentary *Forgotten Silver*), apparently forgetting they had a whole section devoted to them previously in the book. In contrast to the excessive times he repeats personal details (i.e. the fact that Costa Botes introduced Jackson and his partner Fran Walsh), some information relevant to the discussion (i.e. the production companies owned by Jackson) is sparsely mentioned.

Many of the entries from the A-Z section would have worked better if used to reinforce the arguments made in the previous chapters. Chapter one starts with a "Biography", which is basically a narrated list of fulfilled and failed projects. The entry "Short films and minor projects" (p. 169) explains the same information much better. In the second section of the chapter ("Auteur as entrepreneur"), Leotta wisely acknowledges that the "auteur" theory is controversial and provides a brief history of its critical evolution. The "auteur" notion he proposes is not radical, but fluid, incorporating both sides of the argument. Unfortunately, he does not tackle some of its weaknesses. His description of Jackson's cinematic style does not differentiate between the director's original material and his adaptations: both Derek (from *Bad Taste*) and Frodo and Bilbo (created by Tolkien) are considered typical Jackson's protagonists (p. 18). Leotta does not explain in detail the crucial "auteur-entrepreneur" concept. He quotes Jackson stating that he prefers working in New Zealand to

retain creative control, instead of being “an employee for a studio” (p. 66) in corporate Hollywood. However, the French critics who originated “la politique des auteurs” focused on the personal style of Hollywood directors, and Leotta later refers to Steven Spielberg as “auteur-entrepreneur” (p. 188).

In Chapter 2 (“Collaborative Relations”), Leotta excellently analyses the influence of Jackson’s regular collaborators, but he does not address how we conciliate their contribution with the idea of the director as individual creator (Are they not creators as well?). Moreover, his most interesting ideas about Jackson as “auteur” do not appear in these chapters, but are diluted in several entries in the A-Z section: the director’s predilection for making cameos (p. 123), the use of his name as a brand to sell products (part of *District 9* entry), the analysis of *Lord of the Rings* as “auteur film” (p. 218), or how *The Lovely Bones* (p. 223) is torn between personal vision and commerciality.

In contrast, Chapters 3 and 4 are simply superb. Leotta’s expertise in film and tourism is put to good use when describing New Zealand industry (“Wellywood”), especially the contribution of cinema to reshape national identity and increase the number of visitors to the country. Chapter 3 provides a good introduction to Jackson’s place within New Zealand cinema history. Leotta also explains how intertwined is this film industry with the economics of production and government policies (the controversy with *The Hobbit*, which changed the law, p. 78). He gives an excellent analysis of the globalization of film production: Hollywood nowadays participates in other national film industries (“Global Hollywood”), which become satellite production centers (“Local Hollywoods”). This chapter alone makes the book relevant and essential to World Cinema studies.

Chapter 4 describes New Zealand landscape in relation to cinema, under a historical perspective: the themes it evokes, and how the country has been used as location. Leotta effectively examines landscape in Peter Jackson’s films, concretely his ability to create fantastic scenery. A detail apparently as anodyne as the maps in the Middle Earth trilogies (p. 96 – 97) is transformed into a very

important symbol which serves the story, the promotion and stimulates the “tourist imagination” of the viewers.

The subsequent A-Z section is confusing and disorganized. All the brilliant entries about technological innovations developed by Jackson and his team deserved a chapter of their own. Given that Leotta analyzes the evolution of the directors’ style from one film to another, his decision to list the films entries in alphabetical order rather than chronological is questionable. We seem to go back and forth. Some entries feel redundant (“Aviation”) and others could have been expanded. Leotta deals well with criticisms made to race politics in Jackson’s films (“Representation, Ethnicity and Race”). However, he only analyses his commented inclusion of female characters in Middle Earth films as the commercial need for “a love story sub-plot” (p. 210), but not in relation to gender politics nor to the miscegenation anxieties (these love sub-plots are inter-species) he discusses in the *King Kong* entry.

Leotta proves to be knowledgeable about the topic and aware of current cinematic research. However, his interesting ideas appear dispersed, instead of forming a unified argument (partly due to the formatting structure of the series). There is not even a final conclusion. A good book about Peter Jackson, but not as memorable as we hoped it would be.

Reviewer Contact Details

María Seijo-Richart

University of Leeds

M.Seijo-Richart@leeds.ac.uk