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The Inclusion of Black Characters in
Established Universes: Analyzing Social
Reception in *The Rings of Power* (2022)

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ABSTRACT

This undergraduate dissertation analyses the historical, cultural and social causes, along with some of the numerous consequences of hate-filled speeches and criticism in regard to the integration of ethnic minorities in contemporary media productions. To be more specific, this thesis will focus on the recently broadcasted series *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*. With this purpose, viewpoints of both non-professional enthusiasts and professional TV and film critics will be taken into consideration. The main objective of this dissertation is to shed light on the severe social backlash that this TV series has received since its release, and to highlight the importance of representation and racial visibility in a multicultural global context.

RESUMEN

La integración de minorías étnicas en producciones mediáticas ha desembocado en innumerables discursos de odio cuyas causas se pueden clasificar como históricas, culturales y sociales. Este trabajo de fin de grado analiza el caso de la serie recién estrenada en Prime Video, *El Señor de los Anillos: Los Anillos de Poder*, y estudia las causas y las consecuencias de este fenómeno social. Para llevar a cabo dicho estudio, se considerarán los puntos de vista tanto de entusiastas aficionados como de críticos de televisión y cine profesionales. El objetivo principal de este trabajo de fin de grado es analizar las duras reacciones sociales que esta serie ha recibido desde su lanzamiento, así como resaltar la importancia de la representación y la visibilidad racial en un contexto global multicultural.

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1. Introduction

In September 2022, the first episode of the TV series *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* was streamed, reaching no less than 25 million people within the first 24 hours. Since then, it has been caught up in a series of discourses, having been accused of “wokeness” –in the negative sense of the word– for its inclusion of a multiracial cast. The term “woke”, once used to refer to the “acts of resistance and solidarity in response to systematic racism, capitalism, and structural oppression” (Sobande 2724), has effected a 180-degree turn and is now used to discredit and undervalue this new inclination towards full-inclusive films and TV series. As one might expect, *The Rings of Power* has not been the only target of those groups whose goal is to attack and defame progressive ideologies. Within the list of affected productions some of them stand out, including *House of the Dragon* –and the inclusion of a dark-skinned Velaryon House–, *Lightyear* –and the portrayal of a family with homosexual parents–, or *The Little Mermaid* –a film which has not yet been released to the date of the realization of this dissertation, but that has already received staggering amounts of criticism due to its black protagonist.

Thus, this paper is going to expose a number of critical reviews that are representative of the general discontent among the most devoted Tolkien fans, and it is going to analyse the historical, social and cultural causes of this so-firmly-established cinematographic racism and the importance of representation in the media.

This paper follows the ensuing organization. In the first place, the theoretical framework hereinafter presents the basis in which the analysis takes place, including a brief introduction on the theory of reception and the historical representation of minority groups in the media. Next, some background information about Tolkien’s legacy and fandom is given in order to understand the ongoing controversy, continuing with an

explanation on how non-white characters have been introduced into the series. Next, online reviews from both conservative fans and professional film critics are going to be exposed and discussed. Directly after, relevant terms –including “woke” and “white fragility”– are going to be introduced and developed in order to have a better understanding on the subject matter. Finally, the relevance of representation is highlighted, followed by a conclusion that puts an end on the following analysis.

2. Theory of reception and representation of minorities in the media

2.1. Theory of Reception

As Nelmes (114) successfully explains in *Media and Cultural Studies*, in the 1970s Film Studies began to analyse how and why audiences reacted the way they did both emotionally and intellectually, as well as discern differences between the response of groups and collectives of people (*audiences*), and individuals (*spectator*). During the decades of 1960 and 1970, it was commonly thought that the spectator played a 'passive' role in which he/she was influenced by the ideological implications and effects of the film. In more recent studies, the spectator has been granted a much more 'active' role in which he/she is part of the process of meaning-making. Thus, it is important to note that "audiences exist in the culture, as social phenomena" and that "what audiences 'do' with a film is often expressed in terms of *uses* and *gratifications*" (Nelmes 116), which essentially means that this interactional process of making sense of a film is shaped by a cultural background that entails certain sets of needs which the audience expects to be met in the film experience. What is more, even though in previous decades larger patterns of behaviour drawn from collecting quantifiable information were favoured, cultural studies have brought to the table an "increased sensitivity to local conditions and circumstances" (Nelmes 117). As a result, and with the aid of a better understanding of individual and collective experiences and attitudes, a new approach focused on smaller, precise groups has arisen. Audiences may be analysed both as single individuals or larger groups of people, also called 'communities of interest', among which there may be individual differences and collective similarities in the way they react to a film.

Divergences are inevitable in the messages retrieved from a text, and these differences in viewpoints are rather significant for the comprehension of the social dynamics

implicated in reception. According to David Morley (1974), “multiple decodings of a television text are produced from such social predispositions of the individual viewer as occupation, class, and race [...]”, implying that the individual meaning of a text, is an ideologically-driven one.

In connection to this, Roland Barthes’ notion of ‘the death of the author’ had a great impact on reception studies, as it rises the suggestion that any kind of text (including film) only exists when it is read, and thus the reader becomes its creator all at once. Furthermore, it suggests that one film (or any kind of text) has got as many meanings as spectators. Regarding film studies, films that break with our sense of the ordinary within the mainstream commercial film are bound to bring about more diverse responses, implying that it is not cognitive responses, but affective responses what varies more significantly. (Nelmes 126)

On another note, according to Stuart Hall, the process of communication is based on a continuous circuit –production–distribution–production– which means that it is necessary to transform discourse into social practices so as to be effective and completed (Hall 128). To decipher what really the “decoding” process is, the definitions of, and differences between “denotation” and “connotation” have to be clarified. While “denotation” refers to a sign’s literal meaning, that is, a virtually universal meaning, “connotation” makes reference to a more changeable meaning that entails an ideological dimension. According to Barthes (90), “connotation” has “a closer communication with culture, knowledge, history, and it is through them [...] that the environmental world invades the linguistic and semantic system”. Not only that, but connotative codes also represent the dominant cultural order, creating a hierarchy within discursive domains that favours certain “preferred readings” and which is very much linked to a specific institutional, political and ideological.

In brief, it is virtually impossible to have a non-biased opinion in regard to any kind of text, as we consumers are inclined to relate to what we consume based on individual life experiences. However, when a number of individuals have experienced – or not experienced– events in common, they tend to group together and form communities so as to create a sense of unity and comprehensiveness. Hence, it is an old misconception that audiences do not play any role nor are involved in any way in the process of sense-making. Far from being true, spectators are as important as authors –if not more– when it comes to create and give meaning to a cinematic production, and there are, ultimately, as many interpretations as there are spectators.

2.2. Representation of Minorities in the Media

One major politically-charged issue has been candent recently in relation to reception studies that stems from groups that feel disadvantaged due to, partially, the creation of such perception on behalf of the media. It goes without saying that the dominant, most “obvious” representative group comprises white heterosexual males, and that deviations are regarded as a threat that are to be palliated by means of exclusion and ridicule (Staiger 152). Race and ethnicity have had a prevalent position within this debate as a result of the evident visible differences from the hegemonic stereotype, that is, the light-skinned male with European-like traits. However, racism does not always imply tacit instances of such, but it is also represented by the exclusion and marginalization of ethnic minorities (Staiger 171). Hence, blacks tend to support their own productions more than the white do (Staiger 171). Nevertheless, even African American audiences have sometimes favoured white-produced products over black-produced ones.

This social fight for a worthy representation of the black goes back as far as to Lester Walton, who worked as an editor for the *New York Age* in 1905, and condemned racist depictions of African Americans in films produced by the white. A more recent instance includes the protests occurred after Steven Spielberg's adaptation of *The Color Purple*, and its inaccurate and denigrating representation of black men. The immediate consequence of these kinds of misrepresentations and the exclusion of black people in cinema, according to Stewart (675), is "reconfiguring [...] racist hierarchies by subverting the pleasures that Hollywood films anticipate".

In the following sections, I will be mentioning the instance of a recent white-produced TV series that has tried to incorporate minorities into its cast to counterbalance and somehow fight the traces of historical racism that still linger in nowadays audiovisual culture, and the ensuing discourses that have unleashed. The case analysis that is going to be explored comprises the reusing and recycling of an already-existing fantasy universe where white beings predominate over other (sometimes inexistent) ethnical minorities.

3. *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*

3.1. Background Information and Tolkien's Legacy

The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power is based on the acclaimed –both by the critics and the public– trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* (1955), written by the British philologist J. R. R. Tolkien. This American fantasy TV series developed by J. D. Payne and Patrick McKay is streamed in Amazon Prime Video as a result of Amazon buying the television rights for *The Lord of the Rings* in November 2017 (“The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power”), and it makes the most expensive TV series ever produced reaching up to 715 million dollars for just one season (Fletcher). The series narrates the creation of Sauron's ring during the Second Age of Middle-earth, which means that it is the prequel of the exceptionally-praised trilogy that features both men and other anthropomorphic beings including hobbits, elves, and dwarves.

The late J. R. R. Tolkien finds himself mired in a series of controversies as he has been accused for having been a racist and hence attracting mostly a white supremacist male audience in the United States of America. In fact, white supremacist groups have increasingly embraced Tolkien as one of themselves in such an aggressive way that many critics of Tolkien's work have been bullied or even threatened. However, it does not come as a surprise that Tolkien, having been born in 1892, and in spite of receiving a high-quality education (he attended Exeter College and worked on the Oxford English Dictionary and at University of Leeds), assumed racial superiority as well as many other intelligent, educated European men at this time (Farrell 20). From the culture of his own time and the medieval texts he studied, he drew on recognizable antisemitic stereotypes to portray his ‘Dwarves’, and he once openly stated: “I do think of the ‘Dwarves’ like Jews: at once native and alien in their habitations’. He also believed that there was a visual

distinction between Christians and Jews, which explains why in *The Hobbit* he gave Dwarves a distinguishing, physiological, and racially-motivated trait: a long beard similar to the Jews' (Brackmann 88). On a similar note, all the good characters in his trilogy are white, and some of them even have it on their names, such as the White Lady Galadriel, and the elves, all white-skinned, are the most noble race of Middle-Earth. On the contrary, the Orcs –the main evil-doers and antagonists– are described by Tolkien as: “squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned with wide mouths and slant eyes; in fact degraded and repulsive versions of the (to the Europeans) least lovely Mongol-types” (Carpenter & Tolkien letter 210).

To some extent, this explains the efforts to modernize Tolkien's tales and the inclusion of a pluri-racial cast in Amazon's *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*, which gives lead to the ire of right-wingers as they insist on a totally white-washed vision for Middle-earth –with the exception for enemies, of course, who tend to be depicted as “black”, “slant-eyed” or “swarthy”.

3.2. The Introduction of Black Characters

It goes without saying that the matter that has infuriated die-hard fans the most is the presence of black Harfoots (the ancestors of the Hobbits) and black immortal elves, deconstructing Tolkien's well-entrenched dichotomies –dark-savage and white-heroic– and the idea that black actors could only play the roles of Orcs or Easterlings. Black actors that have played a role in *The Rings of Power* have raised their voices, and as the British actor Lenny Henry (Sadoc Burrows in the show, a Harfoot) claimed in a press conference for the *Times*: “In worlds of dragons and elves, why is the casting of a black man the limit at which fantasy fans are prepared to suspend their disbelief?” (Ellis). In addition, the

Puerto Rican actor who plays the elf Arondir, Ismael Cruz Córdoba, recently admitted that he knew beforehand the backlash he and his character would receive: “I fought so hard for this role for this very reason. [...] I felt that I could carry that torch. I made sure that my elf was the most Elven, the most incredible, because I knew this was coming” (Ellis). Similarly, *The Rings of Power*’s executive producer, Lindsey Weber, addressed the controversies: “It felt only natural to us that an adaptation of Tolkien’s work would reflect what the world actually looks like. Tolkien is for everyone. His stories are about his fictional races doing their best work when they leave the isolation of their own cultures and come together”.

It is probably not only the fact that black characters appear, but that they play key, leading roles in the course of the series, breaking with the well-established, racially-charged hierarchy of power. As an instance, Cynthia Addai-Robinson plays the role of Miriel –described as a Black, Indigenous, and people of color, or BIPOC–, queen of Numenor and who is brought to the same level, as far as formal power positions are concerned, as Halbrand (Charlie Vickers): the white, rightful heir of the Southlands. Even the Harfoot tribe is led by a black leader, Sadoc, and when he eventually dies in chapter 8, it is a woman who assumes the role of the leader, breaking at the same time with both the deep-seated white supremacy and upheld female subordination to men.

3.3.Fans’ Reviews versus Professional Critics

These new and controversial paths of production have given rise to a number of hate speeches and criticism. Thus, just to provide some context, *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* has an average audience score of 38% according to the American review website *Rotten Tomatoes*. Moreover, as the review-aggregating website *Metacritic* shows

–by using a weighted average that takes into account the critic’s popularity, stature, and volume of reviews (*Metacritic*)–, while the overall score based on 40 critic reviews is a 71/100, it shows a great contrast with the score users gave to the TV series, which is at a 2.6/10. Some of the most liked user reviews include @laseraptor’s:

“Positive:

- Beautiful cut scenes

Negative:

- Worst story telling in the world
- Annoying identity politics
- Action scenes are ridiculous
- Galadriel
- Casting is questionable It deserves all the hate. Too bad.”

Or as @seelenpufluecker adds:

“Now we come to the trickiest aspect of this series, namely its diversity.

Yes, this series is a child of the times. It perfectly reflects the lunacy and turmoil of our society, which allows itself to be taken over by a minority of ideologically fascist maniacs.

And so this series also follows the current, imposed narrative that in everything everyone must find themselves in some form.”

“And so the creators reflect on this wisdom, ignore all sense and reason and desecrate Tolkien's legacy so that it may satisfy the fascists of political correctness [sic].

To bring it to the point:

Ah... no. You know what? I am tired. I'm tired of it. I'm tired of explaining to the

intellectually poor and the ideologically blinded how stupid and brazen they are.

And those who give absolution to this trash under the terse pretext of fantasy are not worth dealing with any longer than necessary.

And so I conclude with the words: shame on you!”

And lastly –even though we can find hundreds of 0-rated reviews–, @Davjo claims that:

“Wokeism destroyed this show. How can you make something this poor with such a big budget? Where did all the money go? And how could they fire a Tolkien expert only to have him replaced by some "expert" in diversity? That’s [sic] says it all and the result have been witnessed by many. And hence why I also among so many rates [sic] this garbage 0.”

These instances of reviews show a general tendency of discontent and irritation towards the diversification of the new TV series *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*, as Tolkien’s lore of an all-white –except for the bad ones– Middle Earth has been tarnished. Moreover, the producers have been accused several times of *woke-washing*, or integrating minorities into the show to increase profits with no real commitment. Further explanation on the use of the term “woke” will be developed later on in this dissertation.

Nonetheless, these flimsy reviews belong to diehard fans without a sound basis on the professional criticism field. Hence, it is of paramount importance to read what professional TV critics have to say on this topic. Judy Berman, a TV Critic for the digital newspaper *Time*, claims that:

“And it is, frankly, still a relief to see a fantasy show assemble a diverse cast and create a number of powerful female roles; in a world of orcs and anthropomorphic trees, a nonwhite elf shouldn’t raise an eyebrow.”

And, “While so much IP-driven storytelling reeks of cynicism, their scripts read as a sincere, if slightly too deferential, tribute to Tolkien’s work.”

Another highly significant critic review is the one Richard Newby –a black, pop culture journalist, critic and cultural analyst (Baker)–, published in *The Hollywood Reporter*:

“For the past week, I’ve been bombarded with messages of hate, called the N-word, told to go back to Africa, and called on to be executed. The reason? *The Lord of the Rings*. It would almost be laughable if it wasn’t so profoundly sad. A wealth of stories, and a willingness to believe in wizards, Balrogs, giant spiders and magical swords. But allow people of color to exist in Middle-earth? Well, that is an affront to all that’s good and decent. At least that’s the primary argument for those ruinous trolls apparently review bombing and harassing fans of color over Amazon’s *Rings of Power* series.”

“But here’s the thing: Even though Tolkien’s early 20th century progressiveness was not analogous to the progressive attitudes of today, it has no bearing on an adaptation or extension of his works. Things change.”

“I’m making a concentrated effort to keep these matters as light as they possibly can be, to prod at the absurdity of it all. But the reality is that being told you cannot exist in a fantasy world, that you cannot be an elf because you have a fade, or a dwarf because the climate wouldn’t cultivate dark skin, while also being unable to exist freely in a real world in which every walk through a neighborhood could be your last, where simply going shopping can get you shot, and where blinking lights from a cop car are reason for anxiety, is egregious and grotesque.”

Richard Newby's opinion is to be strongly considered since, as being affected by racism himself, he successfully demonstrates that it is not only that white supremacists are getting mad at the showrunners or actors, but he also points at the outpouring of hatred and scorn that has been transferred to everyday life and ordinary BIPOC.

It is imperative to bring to the table professional reviews, especially those written by members of minority groups such as Judy Berman –a woman–, and Richard Newby –an African American–, who can provide the world with a deeper insight and perspective of what is to be misrepresented in TV, or ultimately not represented at all. In the instances heretofore provided, both critics agree on their concern about diehard, far-right, xenophobic Tolkien's fans disbelief in the probability of existence of non-white characters over dwarfs, orcs, or elves.

3.4. Analysis of hate speeches

All things considered, it makes sense to talk about a prevalent racist attitude on behalf of Tolkien's most fanatic admirers –who more often than not belong to the customary dominant group and are unlikely to have suffered any kind of discrimination ever– in relation to the ongoing global situation, but more specifically that of the United States. The origins of these specific racist discourses can be traced back to 2012, when the Movement for Black Lives popularized the term “wokeness” and it entered the national discourse, hand in hand with the hashtags #BlackLivesMatter and #StayWoke (Whiteout 63, 67). These campaigns were immediately followed by ridicule online, jokes and parodies, and the celebrities involved were accused of the ‘celebrification’ of this racial battle. Moreover, the term “woke” has suffered an imminent disconnection from its former reality in favor of the weaponization of such word. The word “woke” has opposing

meanings in today's lexicon, including "acts of resistance and solidarity in response to systematic racism, capitalism, and structural oppression" (Sobande 2726), and on the other side the adoption by US politicians of its weaponized meaning: a backlash against these socially just policies and practices (Zavattaro and Bearfield 586). The latter entails the defense of (white) 'American greatness' and the resistance to cultural changes that seek to drive out a patriarchal society, hence the "anti-woke" attacks on any trace of Black political or social advancement. Thus, any "anti-American" practice (such as the inclusion of non-white characters in a previously all-white universe) is now defined as an act of "wokeness", dismissing its original essence and aspirations. However, it is not uncommon in the United States of America, especially in politics, to adopt and redefine a word in order to reverse the social improvement of any minority group. As an instance of this word misuse we can talk about Ron DeSantis, governor of Florida, who announced a bill called the "Stop W.O.K.E Act" (Stop Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees), which was aimed at protecting White people "from being offended by history" and fighting back against "woke" indoctrination" (Zavattaro and Bearfield 590).

It is therefore not surprising that white supremacist groups react in a similar way in regard to similar instances of this so-called 'wokeness imposition', since after all most of them are blind followers of these political representatives. The efforts to challenge structural injustice suffered by socially marginalized groups, especially systematic racism, have encountered the opposition of these anti-Blackness and anti-woke groups that have feared the collapse of their well-established and entrenched racial superiority and authority that right-wing extremist politicians stand up for, and that Tolkien made sure to project in his works.

3.4.1 History of Cinethetic Racism

Racist speeches by white supremacist groups are not new, but there is an extensive historical background on racist representations of the black community in film. Correspondingly, there have been traces of cinethetic racism for as long as cinema has existed and, alongside, active responses that have tried to solve the issue in diverse ways depending on the sociohistorical moment. Traditionally, American popular culture has always been fraught with images that insisted on racial differences –particularly between the Black and the White. Initially, representations of African Americans were mostly based on stereotypes that legitimized separate social worlds (Hughey 546). Moreover, and according to David Draigh and Gail Marcus of the American Museum of the Moving Image (Hughey 545), by 1933 there were seven different categories of African American stereotypes in television, namely “the contented slave, the wretched freeman, the comic Negro, the brute Negro, the tragic mulatto, the local color Negro, and the exotic primitive”, leaving no room for emancipated or race-independent black characters, and making it always clear that black characters are first and foremost, black. According to Laurence Gross –TV and radio broadcaster– in *Up From Invisibility: Lesbian, Gay Men, and the Media in America*, “when previously ignored groups or perspectives do gain visibility, the manner of their representation will reflect the biases and interests of those powerful people who define the public agenda” (qtd. in Hughley 544). Gross’ theory leads us to the idea that Whites built this stereotyped image of African Americans to their own benefit, that is, the survival of the white dominance by means of portraying the non-whites as incapable, incompetent and ultimately as an inferior race.

However, signs of racially-aware cinema started to show up, and during the 1950s and 1960s, more “positive” characters were demanded, which developed into “blaxploitation” films featuring a more dissident figure of the African American towards

whiteness and racism (Hughey 545). By the 1990s and the 2000s, there was a proliferation of utopian reversal films of black representation, and race films became part of the mainstream. Notwithstanding, as a consequence of the racially-segregated nature of the United States., films about racism and race offered the White experiences they had never witnessed outside the big screen. In *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema*, Bernardi claims that “[...] race in cinema is neither fictional nor illusion. It is real because it is meaningful and consequential; because it impacts real people’s lives” (qtd. in Hughey 547), meaning that those who have lived oblivious to the existence of racist events in real life, will uncomplainingly accept representations of the Black in film. This entails a degree of accountability for truthful, or at least more positive representations of the black community. This is one of the reasons for the first manifestations of Magical Negro films in the 1990s, expanding the role of the black beyond the stereotypical “mammies”, “coons”, and “bucks” (Hughey 544). However, although this is the last registered manner of counterbalance for historical cinethetic racism, this is not yet the black character we find in *The Rings of Power*, which is a much more recent way to address racialized representations. The Magical Negro appeared at first as a positive character in Hollywood film, but its implicit racist tone was still present, as it often involved an economically vulnerable black character that developed some kind of ‘superpower’ as a result of his or her tough situation –as seen in *The Green Mile*, or *Bruce Almighty*.

The problem here arises when, in much more recent films, expectations for black characters are no longer based on the dominant logic. Instead, filmmakers make films that include “trouble-free and uncomplicated black/white reconciliation” (Hughey 550). In other words, when race and culture are not emphasized, mentioned nor questioned, rapprochement is likely to become more feasible and effective, resulting in interracial

harmony. Nevertheless, according to Robert Wuthnow's *Communities of Discourse*, "if cultural products do not articulate closely enough with their social settings, the audiences will see them as irrelevant, unrealistic, artificial and overtly abstract" (qtd. In Hughey 549). Wuthnow's idea throws light upon the negative reactions towards the incorporation of black characters in *The Rings of Power*, since even though their races are not stressed nor pointed at in any moment during the series, (White) spectators have taken offense at their very appearance and existence. In fact, although this TV series is of a highly fictional nature, based on non-existent fantasy worlds and featuring non-human creatures such as orcs, dwarves or Harfoots, the main issue seems to be that black characters look "unrealistic" and "artificial". Hence, one feasible reason why White audiences have taken such exception to this non-problematic inclusion of black characters in television may have to do with the fact that they live in a white bubble where blacks have naturally been excluded and, as well as in the media, have been regarded as "unnatural" or "artificial" when in their surroundings.

3.4.2. *White fragility*

Historical (cinematic) racism has also had an impact on the dominant group, as they have developed what can be called "White fragility". The next 0/10-point reviews retrieved from *Metacritic* are going to serve as an example for the argumentation of this hypothesis hereinafter:

@noiseoNe: "So much n, wtf , is it movie about black panther? [sic]

I'm the great fan of LOTR universe , [sic] but I can't watch this sh*t , creators of this "movie", be more tolerant, in next season u [sic] may add black transgender characters, lol"

@Yaszho: "Graphically the show is beautiful. Unfortunately it is extremely racist and sexist. It is so extremely disrespectful to the legacy, lore and the world of

J.R.R Tolkien! I hope the next actor for Black Panther is white and female with blond hair and blue eyes since lore, history, established characters,etc [sic] don't matter.”

According to Robin DiAngelo (54, 55), white fragility is a term used to refer to the conscious or unconscious blindness or elusiveness to systemic racism accompanied by the inability to cope with “a minimum amount of racial stress” which becomes “intolerable” and “triggering” for the White North American. This implies a series of “protective pillows” that create an insulated environment in which white privilege becomes the cultural standard and builds expectations of “racial comfort” while making Whites unable to tolerate racial stress. This phenomenon does not only affect day-to-day life, but also representations in film. Along these lines, Guerrero notes in his book, *Framing Blackness*, that:

“In almost every instance, the representation of black people on the commercial screen has amounted to one grand multifaceted illusion. For blacks have been subordinated, marginalized, positioned, and devalued in every possible manner to glorify and relentlessly hold in place the white-dominated symbolic order and racial hierarchy of American society.” (qtd. in DiAngelo 17)

What this entails is that any reversal of roles or the immersion of these previously-prejudiced racialized characters will inevitably result in infuriated White viewers who feel they have been deprived of their place at the top of the social and racial hierarchy. This consequent wave of hatred is projected onto reviews such as the hereinabove exposed, trying to downgrade the film and to put an end to the message they despise and find threatening. In the case of newer films and TV series, this “threat” is, according to online anonymous reviewers, the proliferation of “woke” productions that do not represent or respect their well-established notion of white expectations whatsoever. This

“threat” that the Whites fear so much could probably be connected to the possibility of a complete inversion of roles, that is, the extinction or marginalization of powerful white characters, being these –if they happen to appear– subordinated to non-white powers which would put an end to their well-embedded dominant hegemonic whiteness. In short, they very much fear to endure the same treatment and behavior they have had towards racial minorities since the early days, and this fear is translated as emotions such as “anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence...” (DiAngelo 54). DiAngelo’s theory on ‘White Fragility’ would justify why the only ones who have seemed to be affected by the insertion of diversity in *The Rings of Power* (and many other recently-streamed films and TV series, such as *House of the Dragon*) coincide with the most socially-comfortable and established group in (American) society: white, heterosexual and conveniently conservative males.

3.4.3. Importance of visibility in the media

As a consequence of the weight and relevance that this racial issue has been given by the media, one may believe that black characters (Sadoc Burrows, Arondir, Princess Disa, and Queen Miriel) in *The Rings of Power* have now overshadowed white characters. But the four colored characters that are given a relevant role are far from outnumbering white characters. So, it could be said that the concerns are not about the White being left out of the table, marginalized or silenced –as the black community has always been–, but about giving visibility to the Black from a normalized, non-biased lens instead of a white-washing or stereotyped one. However, it is important to stress the importance of representation and visibility in the media in spite of the full-of-hatred racist backlash in order to provide positive examples, in special to the younger black audiences. In addition, Black children’s self-esteem and self-perception are affected by the lack of substantial roles, and our society has allowed one generation after another the inexistence of a

positive image that Black children can rely on, especially in the media. As a result, they unquestionably grow up to accept the idea that lighter is better than darker, and that their skin color is undesirable and despicable. The magnitude of the impact of this black underrepresentation throughout the years cannot be by any means measured. Instead, we can only talk about the vicious circle as a result of the White downgrading the Black and its ensuing self-degrading tendency among black communities. It has only been recently that people –although not everyone, as white supremacists seem to be reluctant to change– have started to become aware of the importance of representation and question the notion of ‘Hegemonic Whiteness’. Moreover, black people are now more likely to voice their unease and discomfort towards certain ways in which media has traditionally hammered the black community into hating themselves in the hope that future black generations feel more comfortable in their skin and build their own identities away from the influence of the white dominance.

4. Conclusion

All things considered, it is not surprising that J.R.R Tolkien's trilogy presents manifestations of white supremacist ideas and a whitewashed worldview as a result of the cultural and historical context that conditioned him –the end of the 19th century until the second half of the 20th century. However, more recent claims regarding the unreasonableness of the inclusion of a pluriethnic and pluricultural cast find other motivations. White, supremacist, diehard fans draw on Tolkien's "lore" and "legacy" to defend their claims against black inclusiveness to mask their deeply-rooted racist and antiquated beliefs. However, taking into consideration all the recent worldwide demonstrations that stand up for not only racial, but also other kinds of systemic inequality, it does make sense to work on more representative and multicultural productions in order to reach a broader audience. In most parts of the world, today's mainstream is a multiracial, multicultural one that shuts racial superiority out and advocates for complete tolerance and cooperation among groups.

In spite of the unfavorable reviews found in online forums, professional film and TV critics –especially those who are also members of minority groups– offer highly relevant and useful insights on matters over and above the simplistic prejudiced criticism on the behalf of white intolerant males. Apart from this, the Black community's responses and attitudes with regard to these new instances of inclusive films matter much more than those who belong to a historically-and-socially unbothered group. For the first time, the Black are provided with positive examples in the media away from the old and negative representations of the Blacks.

Lastly, in spite of all the efforts made by the outraged white supremacist groups, filmmakers are likely to continue progressing on the basis of diversification and inclusiveness for a number of reasons. Firstly, not only have they not been economically

affected by the hereinabove hate speeches and massive criticism, but these pretentious and exaggerated reactions have had the opposite effect: they have promoted *The Rings of Power* for free and have attracted potential new fans to the already-existing community. Besides, most filmmakers are now opting for an increasingly equal and representative basis for their productions, as the twentieth-century society is progressively becoming more aware of the long-existing racial inequality –as well as other types of inequality– and is more eager to mend and make up for their ancestors’ deeds and discriminative behaviors. These are just a few reasons why films and series as *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* and *Game of Throne’s House of the Dragon* are bound to not only continue to appear, but to proliferate widely in the years to come.

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