

John Boorman's The Lord of the Rings: A Case Study of an Unmade Film

FENWICK, James

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/28924/>

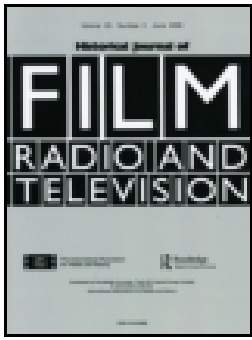
This document is the Published Version [VoR]

Citation:

FENWICK, James (2021). John Boorman's The Lord of the Rings: A Case Study of an Unmade Film. Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television. [Article]

Copyright and re-use policy

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>



John Boorman's *the Lord of the Rings*: A Case Study of an Unmade Film

James Fenwick

To cite this article: James Fenwick (2021): John Boorman's *the Lord of the Rings*: A Case Study of an Unmade Film, Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, DOI: [10.1080/01439685.2021.1976913](https://doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2021.1976913)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2021.1976913>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 24 Sep 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 154



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

JOHN BOORMAN'S *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*: A CASE STUDY OF AN UNMADE FILM

James Fenwick

In 1970, United Artists (UA) announced that John Boorman was to develop a film adaptation of J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings. Boorman collaborated on the screenplay adaptation throughout the first half of 1970 with Rospo Pallenberg, as well as hiring a small team of designers and production managers to assist in the development of a provisional budget. However, archival documentation makes it clear that UA never committed to a production of the project, only an exploratory adaptation. This article uses the John Boorman papers, housed in Indiana University's Lilly Library, to demonstrate how Boorman's work on adapting The Lord of the Rings is an instrumental case study on the wider film industrial process of unproduction, in which projects are more typically financed for development rather than production. It concludes that greater archival research is required in order to reframe scholarly understanding of the industrial processes of Hollywood and other film industries in order to raise questions about why so few film projects ever enter active production.

In November 1969, United Artists (UA) announced a film adaptation of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–55), the epic six-book, three-volume fantasy that had become, by the end of the 1960s, a cultural phenomenon and a publishing sensation in its paperback form. There had been ongoing attempts by film companies (MGM, Disney, UA), producers (Samuel Gelfman, Gabriel Katzka), and even musicians (Arlo Guthrie and The Beatles among them) in the 1960s to acquire the filming rights to *The Lord of the Rings*. As such, the

Correspondence to: James Fenwick, College of Social Sciences and Arts, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, S1 1WB, UK. Email: j.fenwick@shu.ac.uk

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

announcement that UA had purchased the filming rights for \$250,000 and was poised to produce the film in 1970 was significant.¹ Even more significant was the individual eventually approached to write, produce, and direct the adaptation: John Boorman, a British filmmaker who was part of a new wave of Hollywood directors that had emerged during the late 1960s parallel to the growing countercultural youth movement.

However, despite the attention the planned adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* would attract throughout 1970 (from fans and the trade press) and the fact Boorman co-wrote a final draft script with screenwriter Rospo Pallenberg, it remained unmade. Indeed, it would take UA nearly a decade to release an adaptation of Tolkien's novel, finally distributing an animated feature directed by Ralph Bakshi in 1978 and funded by producer Saul Zaentz. But that film was only a partial adaptation, with Bakshi adapting only the first volume, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954) and part of the second volume, *The Two Towers* (1954). As for Boorman's own adaptation, he mounted several attempts between 1970 and 1993 to produce a film based on his script, all of which came to nothing. Boorman had queried the likelihood of any adaptation actually being produced when first approached by UA due to the epic scale of the story.² It was a question that the wider film industry had posed for some time, with Tolkien's novel gaining a reputation as being unfilmable. As one journalist asked, 'How can they possibly film *The Lord of the Rings*?'³ (Of course, Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy [2001–2003] disproved this reputation, becoming a commercial and critical success and reinvigorating the fantasy genre in the twenty-first century). The phrase 'unfilmable' stems from an attempt by The Beatles to adapt the books in 1967, an idea mainly driven by John Lennon.⁴ The band sent a copy of the book to Stanley Kubrick in 1968, but the filmmaker turned them down, reputedly stating that it was 'unfilmable'.⁵

This article is a case study of John Boorman's unmade *The Lord of the Rings*, a project that has received little attention from academics. The most substantial discussions of the project to date are Janet Brennan Croft's article 'Three Rings for Hollywood: Scripts for *The Lord of the Rings* by Zimmerman, Boorman, and Beagle' (2007), Brian Hoyle's book *The Cinema of John Boorman* (2012), and Boorman's own reflections in his memoir *Money Into Light: The Emerald Forest: A Diary* (1985). Croft provides an examination of Boorman's adaptation alongside Morton Zimmerman's unproduced 1957 script and Chris Beagle's script for Ralph Bakshi's animated *The Lord of the Rings*, utilising draft scripts housed in the Tolkien Collection at Marquette University. Croft's focus is principally on fidelity, analysing the ways in which Boorman's script radically differs from Tolkien's novel. As Croft puts it, 'Boorman's script has only the vaguest connection to Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* [...] Characters, events, locations, themes, all are changed freely with no regard for the author's original intent.'⁶ Hoyle's research traces Boorman's adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* across his later films of the 1970s and 1980s, such as *The Heretic* (1977) and *Zardoz* (1974). Hoyle argues that *Zardoz* is Boorman's substitute epic fantasy, a film that has clear allusions to the creative ideas developed for *The Lord of the Rings*.⁷ Other later Boorman projects also contain allusions to the work he undertook on *The Lord of the Rings*, including *Excalibur*

(1981), co-written with Rospo Pallenberg. However, despite the significant investment by UA and the centrality of *The Lord of the Rings* in Boorman's career – it was a project that dominated his creative thinking throughout 1970 and clearly remained in his mind well into the 1990s – it is usually overlooked because it was left unmade as well as a lack of access to archival material until now.

This article investigates the reasons why Boorman's *The Lord of the Rings* remained unmade and explores the extent to which Boorman developed the project. The article reflects on how Boorman's project can now be understood in its archival form, examining the vast array of documents that are part of the John Boorman papers housed at the Lilly Library, Indiana University. The papers were deposited in 2016 and cover the entirety of Boorman's career. *The Lord of the Rings* files comprise a box of material under the subseries of 'Unrealized Projects'. There are hundreds of individual pages of documents that make up *The Lord of the Rings* file, including draft scripts, correspondence, fan letters, fax messages, casting notes, song lyrics, design ideas, budgets and financial reports, contracts and legal notes, and various other handwritten notes. The creative and business fragments that remain of Boorman's project provide an insight into the creative processes not only of one particular filmmaker, but of the wider Hollywood system and the extent to which labour, finance, and resources are invested into projects that are ultimately left unmade, as was the case with Boorman's *The Lord of the Rings*: UA funded the exploratory development of Boorman's adaptation, but never fully committed to producing it. This process is something that Boorman himself reflected on in his memoir:

All film-makers spend time on aborted projects. Sometimes one fails to solve the story problems of a script, but most often it is because the big studios play the destructive game of developing dozens of projects with the intention of making only one in ten or one in twenty. At any one time in Hollywood 90 per cent of the writers and directors are busy working on scripts that will not get made.⁸

The entire Hollywood system appears to be predicated on a process of unproduction.⁹ 'Unproduction studies', as Peter Kunze has deemed it, is the study of unmade, unseen, or unreleased films. It is about the 'logistical complexity of film-making during all stages [...] as well as the logic – or illogic – of the media industries.'¹⁰ The 'illogic' Kunze refers to is the system of creativity and financing that ensures most film projects are left unmade, even when substantial amounts of finance and human labour have been invested. The notion of failure Boorman mentions above is in itself a key issue in the study of unmade films. One view of this process of unproduction is that films are left unmade because of some sort of failure: whether individual failure on behalf of the filmmakers, a business failure on behalf of the studios, or a wider failure of the film industry.¹¹ Yet, most creativity always remains unmade in some way, while the sheer amount of unmade projects that circulate and underpin film industries across the world indicates that the process of development and abandonment is the natural industrial logic of attempting to filter out potential films for production. A film that remains unmade does so not necessarily because of some kind of failure, but rather because of the industrial logic that underpins the film industries.

The fragmentary form of the remains of the unmade in archives can be challenging for historians of film and media, particularly when there is an absence of any final media text. Unlike studies of those films and television shows that were produced, in which historians have access to the final product – the film or television programme – the scholar of the unmade is instead confronted with an absence in film history. The unmade is often nothing more than an idea that someone had intended to produce, but for varying reasons and contexts, never did. The extent to which an idea was developed also means that the study of the unmade changes depending on whether a final draft script was written, whether pre-production work was completed, or even if test footage was shot. It must be noted that the unmade is not always an exclusive category: while some archives have definite subseries devoted to unproduced/unrealized projects, others do not. And at the same time, many archival documents pertaining to produced films actually contain material that was never made: first draft scripts or treatments, ideas, and other creative debris that are substantially different to the final produced film, so much so that the material could be considered unmade. Quite often the unmade consists of nothing more than a few notes, maybe some correspondence, with no tangible, fully formed story for the historian to consult and consume. Because of this, the unmade scholar must foreground the archive and the materiality of the unmade in ways in which the historian of the produced media object does not necessarily have to. I would argue that a key approach to the study of the unmade is through a focus on the archive itself: what it contains, how it contains them, and more importantly what it does not contain – the archival absences that quite frequently make up the historian's encounter with the unmade. The status of a project being 'unmade' suggests that it is incomplete in some way. And that is also the case with most unmade files within archives. A scholar should not expect to find a complete history of where an idea came from, why it was developed, what it was about, and why it was never produced. Certainly, while some archival files about the unmade are more complete than others – with Boorman's *The Lord of the Rings* being one such file – most are typically sparse in the information they contain.

The process of unproduction – of developing and financing unmade films – is not so much about being illogical, as it is about being pragmatic: that only a few film ideas can ever feasibly be produced in a system with finite resources. Creativity is about human interaction, collaboration, and negotiation, and that is what historians may at times find within the archive: encounters between people with an idea and the fragments of creative and administrative labour necessary in the film industry. And this is an important point, because the film industry has limited material and financial resources, but there is an abundance of creative ideas. What archives of the unmade reveal are the clash of these creative ideas with the commercial and financial realities of industry.

By tracing the origins, development, abandoning, and brief resurrection of Boorman's *The Lord of the Rings*, the article uses the project as an instrumental case study of unproduction. In doing so, it suggests a need to move away from simplistic definitions of unmade films as always being about failure, to instead focus on why it is that film industries around the world have operated – and continue to do so – on a system that primarily finances unmade films. Unproduction studies has

the radical potential to revise film history and the current framing of film industries as being about the system of production, distribution, and exhibition, when in reality only a handful of projects ever make it into that cycle. Film and media history has been asking the wrong questions, focused on how film industries work and on produced films. Yet, estimates suggest that produced films constitute around one percent of projects that are developed within, for example, Hollywood, with the vast majority of projects remaining unproduced or in a cycle of development hell.¹² But despite this, some producers, directors, and writers are still able to make a living from this process of unproduction. Unproduction studies presents the opportunity to understand the material, cultural, and social realities of an unwritten history and to pose questions about the processes, interactions, negotiations, and even structural barriers involved that prevent the majority of film projects from ever being made, but that sustain film industries and creative and administrative labour across the world.

Origins

Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is an epic fantasy novel comprised of six books and appendices typically published in three volumes: *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954), *The Two Towers* (1955) and *The Return of the King* (1955). A revised paperback edition was published by Ballantine Books in 1965. The pervasive availability of the paperback edition of *The Lord of the Rings* led to its growth in popularity, particularly with the counterculture of the 1960s. The book's influence is detected in catch phrases of the era ('Frodo Lives!', 'Go-go Gandalf', and 'Gandalf for President' became features of graffiti in the USA) and songs (a litany of references to ring-wraiths, Mordor, and Gollum abound in the lyrics and titles of songs by rock bands like Led Zeppelin), while the book's narrative resonated during a time of political, social, and cultural crises, particularly with the growing anti-war movement against the Vietnam War, which interpreted the book as an allegory for the struggle against the imperial forces of the USA.¹³ *The Lord of the Rings* was also a book frequently chosen for reading matter by those engaged on the hippie trail.¹⁴ Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* was, by the late 1960s, a cultural phenomenon with a demographic that was increasingly dominating the purview of Hollywood film producers: the young twenty-something hippies and college graduates.

The increased popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* coincided with changes taking place across Hollywood between 1967 and 1971, a period deemed the Hollywood Renaissance or the New Hollywood due to the production of films that challenged social, cultural, and aesthetic norms. However, some of the most profound changes taking place during this period were not related to cinematic innovation, but rather industrial and financial uncertainty. The major Hollywood studios were being bought out by business magnates and corporations with no ties to the film industry, subsuming them into global conglomerates. Paramount Pictures was purchased by Gulf + Western Industries Corporation in 1966, UA by the Transamerica Corporation in 1967, and Warner Bros. by the Kinney National Company in 1969. These were holding companies, asset management companies, and conglomerates that had no experience of owning film studios, but were

refashioning them as part of vast, global business empires. Alongside these industrial changes, the film industry was experiencing a financial downturn, with a significant drop in cinema attendance, something that Peter Krämer and Yannis Tzioumakis argue was partially a result of a combination of the new, 'daring' cinema, 'with its emphasis [...] on violence, sex and art' and increased ticket prices putting off cinemagoers.¹⁵

The New Hollywood cinema of the period included films that pushed the boundaries of the representation of sex, drugs, and violence, utilised rock soundtracks, and incorporated elements of European art cinema into their aesthetic: *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *The Graduate* (1967), *Easy Rider* (1969), and *Point Blank* (1967). These were films produced and directed by a new wave of (mostly) young filmmakers that wanted full creative control and to produce films that presented a much darker, even cynical view of the world compared to films produced only a few years before. As Aaron Hunter has argued, these changes combined led to an uncertainty and industrial disarray about 'just how to produce films that would attract large audiences.'¹⁶ As Thomas Elsaesser has argued, 'Hollywood was seeking new "formulas" to woo these different (younger) audiences, and was willing to experiment.'¹⁷

One of these newly emerging Hollywood filmmakers was John Boorman. Slightly older than many of the new filmmakers in Hollywood, he'd had a successful television career in the UK up to the mid-1960s, directing documentaries, a fictional television film, *The Quarry* (1966), and eventually his first feature, *Catch Us If You Can* (1965), a music film featuring the band the Dave Clark Five. The success of *Catch Us If You Can*, combined with its low-budget and appeal to the new youth demographic, attracted the attention of Hollywood producers. As Brian Hoyle has argued, the industrial changes taking place within Hollywood, including the uncertainty about how to produce films that would attract an audience, led some Hollywood producers and production companies to turn towards European directors for inspiration.¹⁸

Boorman's *Catch Us If You Can* was seen in London by an MGM press agent who, thoroughly impressed, set up a meeting between Boorman and the actor Lee Marvin. This fortuitous encounter led to Boorman's recruitment as the director of *Point Blank*, a stylish, European-influenced, crime film. While *Point Blank* was not commercially successful, it did cement Boorman's critical esteem. Boorman again collaborated with Marvin, directing *Hell in the Pacific* (1968), a World War Two set film with very little dialogue about two soldiers stranded on a Pacific island. The film performed poorly at the box office, but it led to another offer with UA: to direct *Leo the Last* (1970), a political drama starring the European actors Billie Whitelaw and Marcell Mastroianni.

Boorman's first three Hollywood features were certainly risky ventures on behalf of the film companies financially backing them, but this reflected the experimental risks being taken by Hollywood studios and producers in a bid to find commercial success. Uncertainty was breeding risk and in turn had provided opportunities for new, innovative directors like Boorman. UA, for example, had financed films that were produced in Britain or centred around British cultural subject matter, having focused its overseas production in the United Kingdom since

the 1950s.¹⁹ In the 1960s, the company had critical and commercial success with British-based films, not least the James Bond franchise that commenced with *Dr. No* (1962), but also The Beatles' films, starting with *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) (UA aimed to profit from the explosion in British culture around the world by signing The Beatles to a three-picture contract).²⁰ UA also invested in British talent, including directors such as Tony Richardson, with the company financing his film *Tom Jones* (1963), again a commercial success, and in British art films, such as Ken Russell's *Women in Love* (1970). But while the latter was a commercial success outside of the UK, many others were not. Indeed, UA financed a series of films by the company that had produced *Tom Jones*, Woodfall Film Productions, most of which were shot in the UK or based on British themes, but which performed less well commercially. Tony Richardson's *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1968), for example, had been a financial disaster for UA, grossing around \$3.2 million on the back of a budget of over \$6 million.²¹ The film had been a risk, given its bleak themes and its analysis for the failure of the charge.

When UA enquired as to whether Boorman had any future filmmaking plans following the completion of *Leo the Last*, the director provided them with a treatment for a film about Merlin, the mythical sorcerer of Welsh folklore and Arthurian legend.²² In return, UA's new president, David Picker, asked Boorman whether he would like to adapt a book for which the company had recently acquired the filming rights: *The Lord of the Rings*.

UA had been involved in complicated negotiations for the production and distribution rights to *The Lord of the Rings* since 1967. Producer Gabriel Katzka, along with producer Samuel Gelfman, had struck a deal with Tolkien and his publisher, George Allen & Unwin, in the summer of 1967 to adapt *The Lord of the Rings* for distribution with UA.²³ This deal fell through though and so, in 1969, UA secured the film production and distribution rights to both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*.²⁴ Gabriel Katzka remained attached to the project as an associate producer, given his early involvement in the contractual negotiations with Tolkien and his publishers, and would continue to be named on the project even once Boorman had been hired to adapt it.²⁵ Reflecting on UA's decision to pursue a film adaptation of the book, A. H. Weiler, writing in the *New York Times*, stated: 'Frodo Baggins is alive and well and living it up on the campuses of the world [...] And now United Artists, mindful of the booming youth market, has announced that Frodo will become a film figure.'²⁶

The Lord of the Rings in the archive

Boorman's interactions with UA can be partially traced in the archival documents of the John Boorman papers from early 1970, while his creative interactions with *The Lord of the Rings* are partially documented between 1970 and 1993; partially in the sense that they can only capture those thoughts, ideas, conversations, and interactions preserved on paper and in written form. What the archival documents show is how Boorman, before committing to the project, decided to reflect on the practicalities, both creative and logistical, of adapting *The Lord of the Rings*. Boorman recorded his doubts, as well as his ambitions, in five-pages of undated

notes. Boorman, having read the book, wrote down his immediate reaction to the possibilities of producing a film:

I have now read all the books, carefully analysed the ingredients, and discussed with my designer, Tony Woollard, the design and costume problems. There are three main questions to answer:

1. Is this a story I want to make?
2. Can I find a way of cracking it so as to produce a filmable script?
3. Can the technical problems be solved, and if so how much will the whole thing cost?²⁷

Boorman recognised that *The Lord of the Rings* presented a challenge; that its structure and narrative form made it naturally unfilmable. The five-pages of notes demonstrate that Boorman was not naïvely approaching an adaptation, but rather trying to unpick any problems that a producer would encounter in the scriptwriting and production stages, and generating potential solutions. Despite all of the problems he knew he would face, Boorman was clearly enraptured by the book, but in response to his first question, his answer displayed experienced nuance: ‘Do I want to make it? Yes. It is a majestic, moving book. But it cannot be a simple yes. It is inevitably qualified by questions two and three.’²⁸

The problems of creating a filmable script were a combination of *The Lord of the Rings* being a long book, in places slow, with a complex and dense plot. There was extensive historical background and narrative exposition that would be required in any film, but in particular it was the intricate history of the Ring itself that concerned Boorman: ‘Although this could all be simplified tremendously, it is essential to explain convincingly (and it is the shakiest plot point) how the ring came into Bilbo’s possession, why he kept it, why Gandalf makes him pass it on to Frodo.’²⁹ It was clearly a point that Boorman had discussed with Tony Woollard, the production designer who he had worked with on *Leo the Last*. The initial solution that Boorman proposes is a giant relief map of Middle Earth built on a studio floor. It would be animated with smoke and fire rising out of Mordor, with Sauron’s Eye suspended over the map on wires. The camera would pan across its surface, while a voice over narration conveyed the history of Middle Earth and the Ring. But even this solution still concerned Boorman: ‘This device would help to get a lot of early information across and untangle later confusions, but whether it would be wholly successful in taking the place of a couple of hundred pages of Tolkien is questionable. Eventually the exigences of writing the script might demand more radical solutions.’³⁰

Boorman recognised that any adaptation, particularly one condensed into a single 150-minute film, would involve losing much of Tolkien’s plot, a process that Boorman would later refer to in a preface to the final draft script as ‘radical adaptation.’³¹ What this meant was a need to focus on three specific plot arcs that Boorman had identified: ‘the supernatural – Gandalf, Elrond, the evil eye; the noble – Aragorn, King Théoden, etc.; and the hobbits – Frodo, Samwise, Merry, Pippin.’³² These were interweaving plot elements that Boorman wanted to develop and bring together in a coherent conclusion.

Finally, in terms of the practicalities of the production, Boorman dwelled upon the size of any potential cast. The production would require hundreds of

extras to represent the various races of Middle Earth. Along with the already daunting prospect of extensive special effects, Boorman proposed that in order to keep budget costs low, there was, 'only one possible way to deal with casting [...] No stars or big names – go for bizarre physical types in many cases non-actors – perhaps dub every player with a voice other than his own to emphasise the other world quality.'³³

Boorman was prepared to consider all of the above problems, and many others, in a process of creative exploration throughout 1970. He told UA he required at least a year to draft a script and plan a budget that would meet the challenges identified. But even in agreeing to adapt the book for UA, it was clear Boorman sensed the improbability of the task he faced: 'When you ask me to make this movie, I feel just as Frodo did when he is asked to bear the Ring. It is impossible, yet impossible to refuse. And he made it, didn't he.'³⁴

Between writing the above memo and writing the actual script, a process taking place roughly between late 1969 and the end of July 1970, Boorman engaged in a variety of creative, business, and technical discussions. However, the actual endeavour of developing the script is not recorded in a chronological order within the archival files, with the material instead being retained in its original filing order in a process of archival provenance. However, scattered throughout the files are memos and letters that clearly detail stages of the creative and development process that shed light on Boorman's interactions and negotiations with various stakeholders, from executives at UA to his working relationship with Rospo Pallenberg. One such inter-office memo, written by Alexander 'Sandy' Whitelaw, UA's European Production Executive at the time, details how Boorman progressed from his initial reservations about the project to entering a six-picture feature film deal with UA by March 1970.³⁵ This document, along with a draft copy of the six-picture contract from July 1970, make it clear how the entire *The Lord of the Rings* project was one based on development rather than active production. There is no archival documentation that shows a firm commitment by UA to producing the project. Instead, Boorman was being hired – for a few months, in contrast to the year that he wanted – to explore the potential of a film based on *The Lord of the Rings* and to deliver a script and budget to UA, nothing more.

Whitelaw's memo makes it clear that Boorman was to write, direct, and co-produce *The Lord of the Rings*, but, at this early stage in March 1970, was only to receive a flat fee of \$50,000 to write a script based on the book. Boorman was required to deliver a final draft script to UA no later than 21 August 1970. He was also required to deliver a preliminary budget, ideally alongside the script, by no later than 1 November 1970. During this period, Boorman could hire a co-writer, production designers, and a production manager to work with him on the script, potential designs, and the budget. The wage and living expenses would be covered by UA. Once Boorman had delivered the script and the budget, UA would then deliberate on whether to proceed with production, having until 1 April 1971 to decide. During this deliberation period, Boorman was able to receive a further fee of \$37,500 for his services until a decision was reached. Should the project go into production, then he would receive a director/co-producer fee of \$275,000 and enter a 25% profit participation agreement.³⁶ One discrepancy in Whitelaw's memo is how it states that, 'in the event of cut-off, full

copyright of Boorman's and any other writer or designer's work on LORD OF THE RINGS will be vested wholly in UA.'³⁷ It would seem that this aspect of the agreement was contested by Boorman, with a further copy of the draft six-picture deal, dated July 1970, stating that he had the right to try to produce a project based on his script with a company other than UA in the future should UA have rejected or abandoned his script.³⁸

The draft six-picture contract contained in the John Boorman papers remains unsigned, though this is most likely as it was a copy sent to Boorman by his lawyers for his own records. The six-picture contract was between Boorman's new production company, Arrow Productions – incorporated specifically for *The Lord of the Rings* project – and UA. In drafting the contract, extensive administrative and legal resources were invested by Boorman and UA, relating both to *The Lord of the Rings* and also other potential projects, which also remained unmade, including *I Hear America* and *Labour of Love*. Only *The Lord of the Rings* is specifically detailed as one of the six-pictures on the contract, though archival evidence indicates that Boorman had several other potential projects in development at the time. This was part of a process of cross-collateralisation, in which finances invested in a project that remained unmade could be recovered from another project that was part of the deal. This was a process that UA had made a key feature of its contractual arrangements with independent producers.³⁹ The approach engendered a production strategy of overdevelopment, in which producers and production companies developed more projects than could feasibly be produced, all in a bid to ensure that at least one project could potentially receive production funding.

Boorman had formed Arrow Productions as a result of UA wanting *The Lord of the Rings* to qualify as an 'Eady' picture.⁴⁰ This was a British government subsidy fund distributed to suitably qualifying films by the British Film Fund Agency. It required the qualifying production company to have been legally incorporated in the UK, for the majority of filming to have taken place in the UK or some part of the British commonwealth, and for at least 80 percent of the labour costs to be paid to British workers.⁴¹ UA had been making use of this subsidy since its introduction and financed an annual programme of British-produced and British-located films.⁴² Other major US companies had also exploited the subsidy. But by the 1970s, most of the major US film companies were substantially reducing the number of British produced films they financed.⁴³

What the contractual agreements and other documentation in the John Boorman papers indicate are the complexities involved in film development. A large portion of the archival material in fact relates to administrative labour and legal negotiations, often involving the most mundane of issues such as living expenses while writing the script. Indeed, an integral part of the whole development process in Hollywood involves the often-hidden labour of lawyers, administrators, and executives that are negotiating the conditions that allow filmmakers and writers to develop an idea into a script. Negotiations between UA and Boorman continued throughout the writing process. But a provisional contract was in place by the end of March 1970, allowing Boorman to commence development.

The writing process

There are three full draft scripts contained within the *The Lord of the Rings* files: a first draft, second draft, and a version styled as being the 'copy from which the final draft was taken.'⁴⁴ Most of the scripts are undated. There are also segments of the draft scripts amongst the correspondence, design ideas, notes, song lyrics, and character biography files. There are also instances in which correspondence quite often serves the function of creative material, particularly in the early stages in which Boorman was collaborating with Pallenberg via letters. There are also instances in which Boorman communicates his ideas and thoughts via letters to his colleagues and friends. As such, the creative process undertaken on *The Lord of the Rings* is not merely represented by the various full-length drafts of the script contained in the archive, but also in a myriad of other documents spread throughout the files.

One of Boorman's immediate tasks was to find a co-writer for the project who would then be contracted to Arrow Productions. The company would initially cover all fees and expenses and would later claim them back from UA.⁴⁵ It was Rospo Pallenberg that Boorman approached about a potential collaboration. Boorman had met Pallenberg during a trip to New York. Pallenberg was, at the time, an architect with an ambition to become a writer. He had limited experience by the end of the 1960s, though had collaborated on a story treatment with the Italian filmmaker Tonino Cervi.⁴⁶ In the memoir *Money Into Light*, Boorman reflects on how at the time he was trying to encourage new talent and sensed that he could mentor and develop Pallenberg, recognising 'a fellow spirit.'⁴⁷ Pallenberg would become a crucial collaborator for Boorman throughout the 1970s and 1980s, commencing with *The Lord of the Rings*, but also working as a 'creative associate' on *Deliverance* (1972), providing uncredited direction and screenplay contributions on *Exorcist II: The Heretic* (1977), co-writing *Excalibur*, and writing *The Emerald Forest* (1985).

Some of the earliest dated material in *The Lord of the Rings* files pertains directly to the collaboration between Boorman and Pallenberg. On 2 February 1970, Pallenberg – still based in New York at that point – wrote to Boorman to provide his own thoughts and ideas about any potential adaptation. Boorman had written to Pallenberg about working on two different projects: *The Lord of the Rings* and *I Hear America*. Pallenberg was open to working on either project, stating that he found Boorman's working methods 'most agreeable'.⁴⁸ Following his letters to Boorman in February 1970, Pallenberg was hired to collaborate on an adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*. Pallenberg seems to have been key in convincing Boorman of the need to create one film, rather than three separate films, arguing that any adaptation should not be 'an eight-hour marathon, with lunch breaks etc., or a series of ten movies, each ending with a cliffhanger.'⁴⁹ He also wanted the adaptation to resonate with a countercultural audience, something that would greatly inform the final draft script. Pallenberg told Boorman that rock music should feature heavily, 'a jarring acid type of rock music', while he recommended casting Ringo Starr in the film.⁵⁰ As for the story, it needed to be streamlined, with storylines focused either around the themes of 'Frodo Lives' or 'Gandalf's Magical Mystery Show'.⁵¹ The former would position Frodo as the protagonist of the film, following his

quest to destroy the Ring and the impact it has upon him. The latter placed Gandalf as the protagonist, with the action seeing him in control of Frodo's destiny and with some of the action taking place within his own head.

Both potential structures would feature explicit sex scenes, with Pallenberg's ideas deviating substantially from Tolkien's book. He wanted to highlight not only Frodo's innocence about the world beyond the Shire, but also his naivety about sexual relationships. Frodo's adventures led Pallenberg to conclude that he deserved 'a little rest & sex.'⁵² The Fellowship decide to take Frodo to a 'House of Delights/Whorehouse, only for heroes, run by a 'Maga-enchantress.'⁵³ The enchantress, attracted to Frodo, leads him away to a room where they have sex, during which Frodo makes 'Kama Sutra-like arousing sounds.'⁵⁴ Pallenberg felt that such scenes could add an element of 'eroticism and horror' to the adaptation.⁵⁵ Tolkien's books do not feature any such scenes, nor any character resembling the Maga-enchantress. Instead, Pallenberg wanted to compile a character based on 'the sources from which Tolkien lifts, the poems of chivalry and fantasy of Spenser, Ariosto, Tasso, etc.'⁵⁶ Pallenberg also wanted Frodo to experience post-coitum sadness, which leads him to wander alone in a forest and culminates in his fight with Boromir, the latter determined to steal the One Ring.

As for the style of the film adaptation, Pallenberg urged Boorman to make allusions to Japanese cinema, in particular the films of Akira Kurosawa and Kenji Mizoguchi, filmmakers he felt managed to infuse story worlds with a 'fairy tale atmosphere and a tough and sharp image'; Soviet cinema (including Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* [1938]) because of the way it portrayed 'clashes between groups'; and to silent cinema in general (he envisaged Gandalf's struggle against the Balrog as taking place in a 'stylised form of silent cinema').⁵⁷ Pallenberg believed that new cinema audiences of the late 1960s had an excellent pre-existing knowledge of film history, arguing, 'Today the kids are into the roots of almost everything, and very much so of cinema.'⁵⁸

Pallenberg's early letters indicate that the 1960s counterculture was influencing his initial thoughts about the project, with a sense of danger and even elements of the music and drug culture of the era seeping into his ideas. The story of *The Lord of the Rings*, as he was recounting it to Boorman at this early stage, was less a fantastical, folkloric tale reminiscent of an imagined past for England, and more an allegory of the chaotic, drug-induced, violent decade of the 1960s and the swaggering danger of bands like The Rolling Stones; after all, the pair were developing the adaptation in the shadow of the disastrous 1969 Altamont Free Concert staged by The Rolling Stones at which there had been multiple outbreaks of violence and numerous fatalities, most notably the murder of Meredith Hunter by the Hells Angel Alan Passaro. Both Pallenberg and Boorman were also keen to underscore the multicultural world of Middle Earth, with its multiplicity of races, to reflect the diversity of real life. This was to be a radical adaptation not only because it deviated so substantially from Tolkien's books, but also radical in the sense that it was incorporating the ideology and politics of the counterculture and of the violence and protests that had shook the world since 1968 and the ongoing chaos of the Vietnam War. The fact that Boorman did not turn Pallenberg down, but signed him up to collaborate suggests how these ideas resonated with his own.

Much of the creative interaction between Pallenberg and Boorman is now lost, not preserved in any kind of written form. This is due to their process of working together in which they would have lengthy, rambling conversations.⁵⁹ Pallenberg relocated to Ireland to collaborate with Boorman throughout April to June 1970. Within the archive are copious amounts of handwritten notes, most of which are illegible – often the notes are written in pencil, the writing now fading – but which occasionally records their thinking during this period. In the early stages, they were making notes directly about the book, summarising themes, plot points, and their own ideas. This included an initial idea to potentially cast Tolkien to appear at the beginning of the film in order to introduce the story and provide background detail.⁶⁰ They also wanted an element of realism in the film, including seeing the hobbits ‘eat and fart.’⁶¹ Presumably these notes, made between 1 April and 13 April, were made while rereading the books and were an attempt to summarise and capture the key elements of the plot. Interspersed with the notes are crude hand drawings, such as one of Sauron’s Eye beaming down upon Middle Earth.⁶² Alongside the notes are battered extracts from the books, with pages having been torn out and pasted onto black card. Some of the pages have fading annotations on them in pencil, others do not.⁶³ On the title page, underneath ‘The Lord of the Rings’, either Boorman or Pallenberg has written, ‘A Philosophical Epic: Legend, Myth, Saga’, and later down the page has written, ‘the age of confusion.’⁶⁴

Much of the creative material in the archive relates to the process of succinctly summarising the plot. Boorman and Pallenberg were overwhelmed with information in Tolkien’s book and were looking for ways to consume, digest, and make reference to this wealth of material, while conscious of the fact they were writing a film that had to condense the book into just over two hours of running time. To aid them, they put together index cards filled with information about the various races of Middle Earth and about specific characters. The cards detail key characteristics of the races, what they look like, customs and traditions, and even details about architecture. There are cards about hobbits, trolls, Elrond, Frodo, Dwarves, Eomer, the Black Riders, Arwen, Aragorn, Orcs, Orcs (Saruman’s contingent), Galadriel, Boromir, Elves, and the Dunedain. Most of these characters and races would be substantially represented in the final script, though not Saruman, whose role was greatly reduced, appearing only in the late stages of the script.

By 10 June 1970, Boorman and Pallenberg had finished a substantial draft of the script – what they termed the second draft. Boorman stated that they were ‘happy and excited’ with the script, though were aware that it was long and needed some ‘polishing.’⁶⁵ Boorman and Pallenberg had enjoyed working together, as Boorman told his lawyers: ‘It was a great delight working with Rospo – we had a very happy and fruitful collaboration and the quality of his work more than justified my faith in him.’⁶⁶ Crucially, in a letter to UA, Boorman concluded:

I think it has the magic and the majesty of the book, whilst being feasible as a film. [Charles] Orme has been breaking this down for costs as we progressed and again we have made further modifications as a result of his findings. By end of July I will submit a complete script, a preliminary budget, together

with design and research material, which will help you to evaluate the project. All this will have been achieved well within the \$100,000 agreed figure, with adequate sums remaining for additional budget work, location searchers, etc.⁶⁷

The final draft script is an overwhelming spectacle of high-paced action, with an array of characters, plot, and exposition introduced and described quickly. While the general structure of Tolkien's novel is retained, much of the detail of his work is lost. As Boorman admitted in a memo to UA executives, 'it has been necessary to make many omissions, and to eliminate several characters. Often we have telescoped many incidents into a single scene. We have tried to capture the spirit rather than the letter of the book.'⁶⁸ In a bid to recount the complex history of the Ring, Sauron, and Middle Earth, Boorman and Pallenberg devise a scene at the Council of Elrond in which the history is performed as a play:

A GROUP of ACTORS in costume and masks, a motley assortment representing the beings of Middle-earth, mounts on to the table in cortege.⁶⁹

The pair describe Sauron as, 'a character who is a combination of Mick Jagger and Punch', with the play taking on shades of The Rolling Stones circa 1969 at the Altamont Free Concert, with Sauron almost a character performing the band's 'Sympathy for the Devil':

He is dressed in white, in a strange robe of pleats, and whenever the pleats splay open, dark garish colours burst forth. A harsh musical beat accompanies this character. He struts menacingly around the table, the others retreat in front of him.⁷⁰

Sauron is even given his own song, performed in chorus:

SAURON (singing)

I am Sauron

Lord of the One Ring

I covet the Three,

I long for the Seven,

I lust for the Nine

To find them, bring them,

rule them, bind them.

The CHORUS repeats a counter-chant.

CHORUS

Rings of Power,

Rings of Power, etc.⁷¹

Boorman and Pallenberg were clearly attempting to develop a script that would resonate with a countercultural audience, as they had discussed in their initial correspondence. They even managed to incorporate suggestions of sex, though

not as explicit as Pallenberg had wanted. Upon encountering Galadriel, Frodo is seduced by her and they spend the night together, Frodo emitting a 'sensual cry.' The script makes Frodo and Gandalf the central characters, and connects the two through visual transitions. For example, in one scene, Gandalf – in battle with Orcs – opens his arms wide to cast a spell. The script cuts to Frodo, resting in the marshes: 'As though responding to GANDALF's gesture, FRODO stirs in his sleep.'

Due to the pace of the script, with many scenes only lasting half a page, Boorman and Pallenberg introduce narrative devices to aid the audience's comprehension of the action and plot. For example, in one scene, Gandalf, flying high above Middle Earth on Gwaihir the eagle, recounts the movements of all the main characters at that point in the story. Gandalf can see a map of Middle Earth and, through a voice over, summarises the state of the plot, what the characters are doing, and what is at stake. Plot and pace is foregrounded throughout the script, sacrificing characterisation. Much of the storyline involving Gollum is reduced, with little context or background about the character being provided. And when Gandalf appears in the court of King Theoden of the Rohan, there is an attempt to convey how he has been put under a spell by Wormtongue. However, the speed at which this story is told (in no more than a couple of pages) reduces the conflict and tension. Similarly, much of the storyline involving Denethor, Steward of Gondor, is dispensed with. He remains a character gripped with despair, but with little contextualisation as to why, with no mention of the palantír (a magical orb) he has been using to gauge the strength of Sauron. And Boorman and Pallenberg also remove Saruman as a substantial character, even though Gandalf repeatedly refers to him as an antagonistic twin of sorts. Saruman appears as a robotic figure in the final stages of the script, including as Sauron's Mouth.⁷²

Instead, the script, particularly the final third, is heavily focused on action rather than any one character. This was to be an action film, potentially even a war film, on an epic scale. The script communicates this quite clearly. Boorman, reflecting on the story writing process, states that, 'A script needs to communicate intentions – first to financiers, later to agents, finally to actors and technicians. It is only when one has backing that it is safe to make a realistic, practical script. A truly accurate script of a film is unreadable.'⁷³ Given the scale and scope of *The Lord of the Rings* script, Boorman needed to convince UA of his vision; this required him to back up his script with a budget and a pragmatic production plan.

Casting, design and budget

UA required that Boorman submit a provisional budget alongside his script. In the archive, a substantial number of documents pertain to the design, budget, and even potential casting of the film, taking the form of correspondence, notes, and memos. Throughout June and July 1970, after having completed a draft of the script, Boorman and Pallenberg relocated to London to work with production designer and art director Tony Woollard and script and visual consultant William Stair.⁷⁴ Woollard and Stair were both close collaborators of Boorman's; Woollard had worked as his production designer on *Catch Us If You Can* and *Leo the Last*,

while Stair had worked in the editorial department as a colour consultant on *Point Blank* and co-written the script for *Leo the Last*. Boorman updated UA on his intentions, stating that he wanted to stage a series of conferences between himself, Pallenberg, Woollard, and Stair in order to, 'draw up pictures to understand problems and practicalities in filming.'⁷⁵ This would provide the basis of the research to evaluate the necessary special effects and, ultimately, inform a draft budget for the production. In addition, Charles Orme provided input on the budget and the costings, which in turn led to minor modifications of the script. Orme had worked as a production manager and line producer since the 1940s, working on Powell and Pressburger films such as *The Red Shoes* (1948). He had also previously been a line producer for Boorman on *Leo the Last*.

The budget took into consideration not only the contexts of the script (the necessities of adapting a complex epic fantasy, for example) but also the industrial realities of film production in the UK at that time. In a notes document accompanying the draft budget, Orme reflected on the high unemployment rate within the British film industry (and the UK at large) in 1970. As a result, Orme budgeted production unit salaries for a six-day week in order to attract high quality technicians, but also out of a realisation that the production would not be able to afford costly overtime allowances.⁷⁶

A substantial portion of the planned budget (\$1,581,000) was for the costs of filming the final battle sequences in Spain.⁷⁷ The location of US-financed runaway film productions in Spain had become fairly common practice throughout the late 1950s and the 1960s, particularly for sword and sandal epics such as *Spartacus* (1960) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964). Boorman wanted much of the budget to cover the costs of a, 'really big finale', including the Siege of Minas Tirith by Sauron's army and the ensuing Battle of the Pelennor Fields.⁷⁸ The aim was to shoot this finale on location close to either Granada or Almeria and to employ the Spanish army as extras over a shooting period of six weeks, between August and September 1971. The rest of the shooting would take place in Ireland and on sound stages in England for a shooting period of 17 weeks between April and August 1971, with additional model work in studios at the end of September 1971.

The special effects budget, totalling £30,000 and covering the cost of model work, shooting, and processing, was based on estimates of the special effects work on the film *The Assassination Bureau* (1969). In his accompanying memo to the budget and script, Boorman stated that despite the heavy emphasis on action and epic battle scenes, much of the production would be fairly inexpensive due to the special effects. He cited the example of the lengthy sequence in the underground dwarf kingdom of Moria. Rather than revealing an epic set, much of the sequence would be darkly lit, with Gandalf's staff occasionally lighting up areas of the underground kingdom to imply its scale. The tunnel along which the characters walked would merely be a corridor in a studio. Any backdrop revealed through the light on Gandalf's staff would be, 'a few frames of still photographs – a vaulted cathedral roof, the interior of an Antonio Gaudi building, catacombs, mine workings etc.'⁷⁹ Preparation for the special effects, and preproduction for principal photography, would last six months, with Boorman making it clear to UA that the

project needed to receive the go-ahead for production no later than October 1970: 'If a go-ahead is delayed, the picture would have to be shelved until the summer of 1972.'⁸⁰

The plan was to pay eight actors as principal artistes as part of above the line costs: these would be for the roles of Frodo, Sam, Merry, Pippin, Bilbo, Gandalf, Aragorn, and Gollum (though, the latter character only marginally features in the script).⁸¹ The remaining cast would be included in the below the line costs, with an allowance of \$120,000 for the roles of Legolas, Gimli, Boromir, Theoden, Eowyn, Galadriel, Arwyn, Denethor, the Nazgul, Eomer, Elrond, and Wormtongue. Throughout the writing process and subsequent design and budgeting conferences, Boorman had written down several thoughts about a potential cast, including Vincent Price and Christopher Lee, though he mainly wanted to cast unknown actors.⁸² In his notes to UA, Boorman said that he felt only the roles of Gandalf and Aragorn should be cast with leading names. For the hobbits, Boorman wanted to undertake auditions of 17- to 18-year-olds who were 'very short and Hobbit-like'.⁸³

The total planned budget for *The Lord of the Rings* (excluding above the line costs, such as Boorman and Pallenberg's fees, plus eight principal actors) was \$4,880,000. Given the epic scale of what Boorman planned for the production, this does seem a low figure. Other UA produced films from that era, such as the fifth and sixth instalments of the James Bond series had much bigger budgets: *You Only Live Twice* (1967), which involved an elaborate set piece in an underground volcano, had a budget of \$10 million (the production costs of James Bond films would rise exponentially by the mid-1970s).⁸⁴ Other epic UA releases from that period included *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, which had a budget of approximately \$7 million, and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* with a budget of approximately \$11 million, and *Battle of Britain*, costing \$14 million; all these films lost money for UA.⁸⁵ The key comparative film of the era is Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), a film that required extensive special effects work. Produced in the UK, it had originally been budgeted in the region of \$4.5 million, but the budget had eventually risen to over \$11 million (a result of Kubrick underestimating the costs of the special effects and new union rules in the UK that increased labour costs).⁸⁶ The unanticipated increase in *2001's* budget nearly bankrupted MGM, the company that financed it.⁸⁷ There were existing precedents, therefore, that suggest the budget for Boorman's *The Lord of the Rings* would eventually have to increase if it had been produced.

However, one reason for the low budget was the fact that it was, along with the design plans, provisional. Rather than presenting any in-depth detail, the budget was more about indicating the feasibility of producing the script, along with examples of how the special effects work would be undertaken. Much of the budget for the shooting in Spain was non-existent, largely because Charles Orme could not provide specific details about costs and locations without visiting Spain. Still, by the end of July 1970, a bound final draft script of *The Lord of the Rings*, along with illustrations, a draft budget, and a detailed memo were submitted to UA for consideration in fulfilment of the initial agreement between Boorman and the company.

Unmade

Boorman had adapted *The Lord of the Rings* as a script and devised a provisional budget ahead of schedule, and within the agreed fee of \$100,000, 'with adequate sums remaining for additional budget work, location searchers, etc.'⁸⁸ On that level, Boorman's work had been a success. The cost of this creative development process to UA, which had commissioned it, was sizeable. Alongside Boorman's fees, and the fees of Pallenberg, there were also expenses for the work of Woollard and Stair, incidental expenses for living and administration throughout the process, as well as for purchasing stationary, multiple copies of *The Lord of the Rings*, postage, and office rental, the costs of Charles Orme's accountancy work, and the legal fees incurred in incorporating Arrow Productions. In total, the creative development process had cost UA £16,338.68, without any firm commitment to produce a film.⁸⁹ Boorman himself reflected on the increasing likelihood that the project would remain unmade in a letter to his lawyers:

UA have had the script for 3 weeks but I still have no word from them. Rumour has it they are short of money and whether they will be able to raise the necessary finance to make *The Lord of the Rings* is questionable.⁹⁰

The fact that *The Lord of the Rings* project had stalled by August 1970 was in itself not remarkable. The process undertaken by Boorman and UA in fact reflects the reality of film industry work, in which the vast majority of projects never get produced. Instead, vast amounts of money is invested in projects that never go beyond development, sometimes preproduction, but rather end up filed away in the archives of studios and filmmakers, maybe one day to resurface for academic study.

The reasons as to why a project is left unmade of course varies depending on context. As indicated above, Boorman attributed it to the fact that UA was a company that was struggling financially. Certainly, UA had announced publicly by August 1970 that it was implementing cost-cutting measures following several underperforming releases, Boorman's own *Leo the Last* amongst them. UA's then president, David Picker, singled out *Leo the Last* as a film with little financial potential following its release.⁹¹ Picker was instigating a review process of budgets, with production decisions being informed by, 'an even greater awareness of cost'.⁹² The company had financed a number of British-produced or subject-based epics by the end of the 1960s that had failed at the box, including *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (see above), *Battle of Britain* (1969), and the musical-fantasy *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang Bang* (1968). By the start of 1971, UA had slowed down the number of European-produced pictures in which it was investing, while production of *Man of La Mancha* (1972) had stalled; the latter was a project that UA had invested over \$2 million in for both acquisition and development.⁹³ There was a wider industry move toward smaller-budgeted films and fewer releases, targeting productions that were likely to actually be produced rather than languishing in development. Beyond UA, Warner Bros. was cutting back the funds for project development in a bid to reduce the number of unmade projects. John Calley, head of production at Warner Bros., stated in a press release that, 'we're in the business of making pictures, not just writing treatments and screenplays.'⁹⁴ Calley's remark, along with the cost-cutting measures being implemented across the

industry, was a sign of retrenchment from overdevelopment (the development of more projects than could feasibly be produced) to underdevelopment (having fewer projects in development as a means of mitigating financial overinvestment), and an indicator of the impact of a wider recession. The cost-cutting measures had led companies to cancel a slate of planned productions from their books between 1969 and 1970, while also turning down planned epics.⁹⁵ This included Stanley Kubrick's *Napoleon*, an epic war film that UA refused to fund.⁹⁶ Boorman was pitching *The Lord of the Rings* to UA as just that: an epic war film, but given the industrial contexts, along with the fact that UA had publicly named Boorman's current release with them – *Leo the Last* – as a financial disappointment, it was increasingly unlikely that *The Lord of the Rings* would now receive financing.

Correspondence in the archives indicates that Boorman already knew that UA had decided against producing *The Lord of the Rings* by August 1970. He was writing letters to colleagues indicating as much, as well as turning down a potential meeting with Tolkien himself as he did not want to waste the author's time if UA was not prepared to finance a project. He told Tolkien:

I had expected that by this time UA would have given me a definite go ahead to make "Lord of the Rings". However, at this moment, I am still very uncertain as to their intentions. They are vacillating. Of course, a considerable sum of money will be required to make the picture and the present climate in the film industry is not very favourable to big budget films. This factor and the general economic gloom has probably given them second thoughts. They keep delaying their decision.⁹⁷

The archive does not contain any definitive answer from UA. Nor does it seem that Boorman received one. Instead, he maintained hope that he could eventually produce the film. By November 1970, *The Lord of the Rings* was indefinitely postponed, but it did not stop Boorman – who was by then in the process of developing *Deliverance* – from approaching potential stars about the project, including Kirk Douglas: 'When we get together I want to show you Lord of the Rings in case there is something in it which interests you as an actor.'⁹⁸

Reputedly, UA eventually purchased the rights to Boorman's script for \$3 million in order to allow Ralph Bakshi to direct his animated version of the film.⁹⁹ But the archival remains of the project make it clear that Boorman never entirely gave up on his adaptation. Bookending the archival files are a series of memos and faxes from the early 1990s. In them, Boorman indicates that he was exploring a potential new deal to revive his adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*, largely as a result of industrial advances in the use of new computer-generated imagery on *Jurassic Park* (1993) and *Super Mario Bros.* (1993). Boorman believed technological advances in CGI would allow him to realise the spectacular vision of his adaptation in a way he would not have been able to do so in 1970. In thinking about reviving the project, Boorman critically reviewed his script for *The Lord of the Rings* in a memo he faxed to Jake Eberts, producer of *Super Mario Bros.* He was tentatively approaching the producer about collaborating on the project. Boorman described his own script as being, 'overlength, overloaded, too complex, and has an excess of violent battle scenes in the final act.'¹⁰⁰ He proposed to Eberts that he would

drop the war-action focus of the script, including the entire final third that centred on the siege of Minas Tirith and the Battle of Pelennor Fields. Instead, he wanted to foreground the story of Frodo and Sam, Gandalf and Saruman:

The story should confine itself to these characters and their heroic struggles to achieve the quest [...] I would hope that the severe cuts I propose would make space to develop some of the other characters who are presently undernourished. I would like to give the wonderful character of Gollum some more time. The humour and warmth of the Hobbits should be allowed to blossom.¹⁰¹

To help him develop this character-driven adaptation, Boorman proposed a collaboration with screenwriter Tony Grisoni. He also envisaged a cast made up of leading actors, in contrast to his vision of a largely unknown cast in 1970. For Gandalf, he proposed an eclectic mix of either Jack Nicolson, Kevin Kline, Jeremy Irons, or Daniel Day Lewis; for Aragorn, Sean Connery or Rutger Hauer; for Gimli, Bob Hoskins; for Elrond, Tilda Swinton (as he told Eberts, 'I would cast all the Elves, male and female, as women'); and for Gollum, Robbie Coltrane, Danny DeVito, Dudley Moore, or Jeff Goldblum. Perhaps further emphasising the character-driven nature of his newly envisaged adaptation, Boorman wanted to be cautious in the use of CGI: 'I would use these effects sparingly, given the high costs involved. Apart from the big magical set-pieces, most of the scenes can be realised simply in exterior landscapes or on constructed sets.'¹⁰² Interestingly, Boorman was considering shooting in Eastern Europe, incentivised by government subsidies, as were other producers at that time, including Spielberg (who shot *Schindler's List* in Eastern Europe) and Kubrick (his abandoned *Aryan Papers* was to have been shot in a variety of Eastern European countries).¹⁰³

Much of what Boorman was considering was merely speculation and he was waiting on confirmation from Eberts that he was interested. Unfortunately, Eberts agreed with Boorman's critical assessment. Responding in March 1993, Eberts told Boorman that, 'I found the script too long, dense and complicated, not to say expensive. On the other hand, I also feel that the audience has to be given some taste of THE HOBBIT in order to understand LORD.'¹⁰⁴ Eberts had also lost confidence in his own project at that time, *Super Mario Bros.*, sensing that it was about to fail at the box office; he was right, with the film being both a critical and financial failure. Eberts did not want to commit himself to another overly expensive special effects film that was unusual in its plot. While he ended his letter to Boorman by suggesting they talk on the phone, it is here that the archival trail for Boorman's *The Lord of the Rings* ends.

Conclusion

Whatever the script's flaws, Boorman had achieved what he'd been tasked with by UA: to adapt *The Lord of the Rings* into a single feature-length script. In that respect, he and the project had been successful. Boorman's contract with UA for *The Lord of the Rings* was designed with risk in mind and the foresight that the project would likely remain unmade. This is clear from the cross-collateralisation

clause included in Boorman's contract, designed to reduce the costs and risk to UA in developing the project, and from the fact UA had not given Boorman the year he wanted to adapt the script, instead only giving him a matter of months. There had never been a commitment to produce a film, only a script, and that is what exists within the John Boorman papers: the creative, administrative, and to some extent technical work involved in the development, exploration, and research for an adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*. In other words, the material remains of the process of unproduction.

The aim was always about considering if a film could be produced based on Tolkien's books and if so what the logistical requirements were and the costs involved. And it is precisely this creative process of unproduction that underpins filmmaking in Hollywood and beyond that is the lasting value of Boorman's work on *The Lord of the Rings*. For while *The Lord of the Rings* as a literary property gained the status of being unfilmable, in truth most of the creative projects that emerge within the Hollywood system remain unfilmable for a variety of contexts, part of a 'shadow history' of unmade films. Many of these projects, like Boorman's *The Lord of the Rings*, are now archival artefacts, taking on a new context of their own as relics and debris of a creative and industrial process of unproduction. In analysing these artefacts, and understanding the un-filmed creativity they resemble, it is possible to reframe scholarly understanding of film history. Rather than being about a system of production, distribution, and exhibition, Hollywood and other film industries around the world are about a continuous process of development, pre-production, abandonment, and occasionally revival. Those projects that make it out of this particular cycle into the production, distribution, and exhibition cycle are rare.

This case study of the 'unfilmable' *The Lord of the Rings* also indicates how it is possible to refine understanding of unmade films away from being classed as failures. Boorman and other filmmakers like him that attempted to produce an adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* were doing so in a system that already privileged a handful of projects each year for active production. The structures, barriers, and gatekeepers preventing the majority of film projects moving from development into production are varied and many. Arguably, in Boorman's case, the barrier was partially his own track record of commercially unsuccessful feature films up to 1970 as well as the rapidly transforming industrial contexts of the era. But it is a key outcome of studying the unmade, whether extensive creative material exists or not: focusing on those films that are not made in a sustained way, via attention to the material archival remains, will reveal the film industry, whether Hollywood or elsewhere, in a new light, foregrounding and emphasising just who or what are the barriers to production and distribution.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the staff of the Lilly Library, Indiana University, for their assistance in providing digital access to the John Boorman papers.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

JBM = John Boorman Mss., 1940–2014, Indiana University.

1. 'Tolkien Rights and the Amazon Television Deal – some insight', TheOneRing.net, <https://www.theonering.net/torwp/2017/11/15/104416-tolkien-rights-and-the-amazon-television-deal-some-insight/> (accessed March 2, 2021).
2. 'Lord of the Rings,' n.d., Box 61, Design Ideas, JBM.
3. 'From London', news clipping, Box 61, Design Ideas, JBM.
4. Brian J. Robb and Paul Simpson, *Middle-earth Envisioned: The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings: On Screen, On Stage, and Beyond* (New York: Race Point Publishing, 2013), 104.
5. Denis O'Dell, *At the Apple's Core: The Beatles from the Inside* (London: Peter Owen, 2002), 91–105; Filippo Ulivieri, 'Waiting for a Miracle: A Survey of Stanley Kubrick's Unrealized Projects', *Cinergie*, 12, no. 12 (2017): 95–115. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2280-9481/7349>.
6. Janet Brennan Croft, 'Three Rings for Hollywood: Scripts for *The Lord of the Rings* by Zimmerman, Boorman, and Beagle', in *Fantasy Fiction Into Film*, ed. Leslie Stratyner and James R. Keller (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2007), 7–20.
7. Brian Hoyle, *The Cinema of John Boorman* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 92.
8. John Boorman, *Money Into Light: The Emerald Forest: A Diary* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 21.
9. James Fenwick, *Unproduction Studies and the American Film Industry* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).
10. See Peter C. Kunze, 'Herding Cats; or, the possibilities of unproduction studies', in *Shadow Cinema: The Historical and Production Contexts of Unmade Films*, ed. James Fenwick, Kieran Foster, and David Eldridge (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 130.
11. Kunze, 'Herding Cats'; Simone Murray, 'Phantom adaptations: *Eucalyptus*, the adaptation industry and the film that never was', *Adaptation* 1, no. 1 (2008): 5–23; Charles Ramirez Berg, 'Notes on the Emergence of Failure Studies', *The Velvet Light Trap* (2009): 101–102.
12. Fenwick, *Unproduction Studies*.
13. Brian Rosebury, *Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Jonathan Witt, 'Tolkien, Hobbits, Hippies and War', *Acton Institute Power*, <https://blog.acton.org/archives/68710-tolkien-hobbits-hippies-war.html> (accessed March 2, 2021)
14. Sharif Gemie, 'Cross Cultural Communication and the Hippy Trail 1957-78', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 19, no. 5 (2017): 668.

15. Peter Krämer and Yannis Tzioumakis, 'Introduction', in *The Hollywood Renaissance: Revisiting American Cinema's Most Celebrated Era*, ed. Peter Krämer and Yannis Tzioumakis (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), xiii.
16. Aaron Hunter, *Authoring Hal Ashby: The Myth of the New Hollywood Auteur* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 2.
17. Thomas Elsaesser, *The Persistence of Hollywood* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 215.
18. Jack Valenti, 'How Hollywood's Establishment Helps the Young', *Washington Post*, April 13, 1969, 176.
19. Tino Balio, *United Artists, Volume 2, 1951-1978: The Company That Changed the Industry* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin University Press, 2009), 236.
20. Stephen Glynn, *A Hard Day's Night* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005).
21. *Ibid.*, 245–246.
22. Boorman, *Money into Light*, 20.
23. 'Tolkien Rights and the Amazon Television Deal.'
24. Michael Cieply, "'The Rings' Prompts a Long Legal Mire', *New York Times*, February 16, 2008, [https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/16/movies/16ring.html?_r=1&emc=th&oref=slogin&th.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/16/movies/16ring.html?_r=1&emc=th&oref=slogin&th.html?_r=1&emc=th&oref=slogin&th.html).
25. 'Upper-Teen "Hobbits" As Boorman Feature for UA; Director Co-Scripting', *Variety*, July 1, 1970, 22.
26. A. H. Weiler, 'Good Lord, It's Frodo Baggins', *New York Times*, June 14, 1970, 107.
27. 'Lord of the Rings', n.d., Box 61, Design Ideas, JBM.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*
31. Memo to Alexander Whitelaw, David Picker, and Herb Jaffe, July 24, 1970, JBM.
32. 'Lord of the Rings', n.d.
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*
35. Alexander Whitelaw, UA Inter-office memo, March 25, 1970, Box 61, JBM.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*
38. U.A. 6-picture deal, July 30, 1970, Box 61, JBM.
39. See James Fenwick, 'A production strategy of overdevelopment: Kirk Douglas's Bryna Productions and the unproduced *Viva Gringo!*', in *Shadow Cinema: The Historical and Production Contexts of Unmade Films*, ed. James Fenwick, Kieran Foster, and David Eldridge (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 17–37.
40. Letter from Denton, Hall and Burgin to John Boorman, May 5, 1970, Box 61, JBM.
41. James Fenwick, 'The Eady Levy, "the envy of most other European nations": Runaway productions and the British Film Fund in the early 1960s', in *The Routledge Companion to British Cinema History*, ed. I. Q. Hunter, Laraine Porter, Justin Smith (London: Routledge, 2017), 192.
42. Balio, *United Artists*, 236.

43. Margaret Dickinson and Sarah Street, *Cinema and State: The Film Industry and the Government 1927-84* (London: British Film Institute, 1985), 237.
44. *The Lord of the Rings* screenplay, final draft, undated, Box 61, JBM.
45. Contract between Arrow Productions and Rospo Pallenberg, 1970, Box 61, JBM.
46. Letter from Rospo Pallenberg to John Boorman, February 24, 1970, Box 61, JBM.
47. Boorman, *Money into Light*, 20.
48. Letter from Rospo Pallenberg to John Boorman, February 24.
49. Letter from Rospo Pallenberg to John Boorman, February 2, 1970, Box 61, JBM.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
59. Boorman, *Money Into Light*, 6.
60. 2nd April – Opening Seq, Box 61, JBM.
61. 2nd April – departure from Shire, Box 61, JBM.
62. Ibid.
63. *The Lord of the Rings* book title page, ‘a philosophical epic’, Box 61, JBM.
64. Ibid.
65. Letter from John Boorman to Alexander Whitelaw, June 16, 1970, Box 61, JBM.
66. Letter from John Boorman to Dick Hyland, August 14, 1970, Box 61, JBM.
67. Letter from John Boorman to Alexander Whitelaw, June 16.
68. Memo to Alexander Whitelaw, David Picker, and Herb Jaffe, July 24.
69. *The Lord of the Rings*, final draft script, 33, Box 61, JBM.
70. Ibid., 34.
71. Ibid.
72. The choice to reduce the role of Saruman prefigures the later decision of Peter Jackson, in his *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, to cut many of the scenes featuring Saruman, to the obvious dismay of the actor Christopher Lee, who had played the character.
73. Boorman, *Money Into Light*, 11.
74. Ibid.
75. Ibid.
76. Lord of the Rings: Notes Relating to the Budget for Ireland, July 21, 1970, Box 61, JBM.
77. Memo to Alexander Whitelaw, David Picker, and Herb Jaffe, July 24.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid.
80. Ibid.

81. Lord of the Rings: Notes Relating to the Budget for Ireland.
82. Casting, handwritten notes, n.d., Box 61, JBM.
83. Memo to Alexander Whitelaw, David Picker, and Herb Jaffe, July 24.
84. Balio, *United Artists Volume*, 269–271.
85. *Ibid.*, 272.
86. James Fenwick, 'The Problems with Kubrick: Reframing Stanley Kubrick Through Archival Research', *New Review of Film and Television Studies* (forthcoming).
87. James Fenwick, *Stanley Kubrick Produces* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 151.
88. *Ibid.*
89. Lord of the Rings: Paid by U.A., n.d., Box 61, JBM.
90. Letter from John Boorman to Dick Hyland, August 14.
91. Ronald Gold, 'Picker on Flop Loss-Cutting: Won't Pour Good Money After Bad', *Variety*, August 26, 1970, 2.
92. *Ibid.*
93. 'United Artists Stalls Overseas' Costly Ventures', *Variety*, March 3, 1971, 3.
94. '25 to 30 New Feature Films Planned by Warner Bros. in Coming Year', *Boxoffice*, April 27, 4.
95. Fenwick, *Stanley Kubrick Produces*, 158-159.
96. *Ibid.*
97. Letter from John Boorman to Joy Hill, August 14, 1970, Box 61, JBM.
98. Letter from John Boorman to Kirk Douglas, November 18, 1970, Box 61, JBM.
99. Cieply, "The Rings" Prompts a Long Legal Mire.'
100. Memo from John Boorman to Jake Eberts, January 4, 1993, Box 61, JBM.
101. *Ibid.*
102. *Ibid.*
103. Fenwick, *Stanley Kubrick Produces*, 188.
104. Faxed letter from Jake Eberts to John Boorman, March 22, 1993, Box 61, JBM.

Notes on contributor

James Fenwick is a Senior Lecturer in Media Arts and Communication at Sheffield Hallam University. He is the author of *Unproduction Studies and the American Film Industry* (Routledge, 2021) and co-editor of *Shadow Cinema: The Historical and Production Contexts of Unmade Films* (Bloomsbury, 2021) and *Studying the Unmade, Unreleased, and Unseen: Histories, Theories, Methods* (Intellect, forthcoming).
