

# Stuck in the Middle with Frodo and Neo

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Laurie Cubbison

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I HAVE BEEN a science fiction/fantasy geek since first reading Lord of the Rings when I was fifteen years old. I bring this up to make a point about the movies I'm reviewing in this essay: The Matrix Reloaded and Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers. Both are middle chapters in a trilogy; the third and final installments - The Matrix Revolutions and Lord of the Rings: Return of the King - come out on November 7 and December 9 respectively. As middle chapters in a trilogy, these two movies do not-- indeed, are designed not to--exist as self-contained narratives in their own right. Rather, though financed and marketed as mainstream movies, they participate in the narrative practices of the science fiction/fantasy literary subculture where these days self-contained narratives rarely exist, but where both official and unofficial narratives tend to spring up around a core narrative, whether in the form of role playing games, video games, or fan fiction. Even when the text is created by an author as a self-contained narrative, fans like to speculate, adding their own stories to the author's original.

Within the world of fantasy and science fiction, it is common for authors to engage in world-building and then, having built their world, multiply the narratives that take place within it. A primary story arc may dominate the texts, as in the three volumes of Lord of the Rings, or the Matrix movies, but the same author may provide, or authorize, back stories and side stories that contribute to the world that has been created, stories which may take the form of supplementary novels. Richard C. West refers to this form of narrative as "interlacement." As described by West, "Tolkien's main story thus involves many other stories, all more or less independent yet linked at many points and occurring more or less simultaneously" (78). Once the author's work has achieved a certain level of fan popularity, the narratives multiply even further to include a film version and games (whether video games, role playing games or collectible card games). Meanwhile, creative fans get into the act, speculating (in great detail) on future developments and writing fan fiction (or stories based on the characters and events of the official "canonical" version of the narrative). The

initial interlaced structure of the official narrative thus expands to include the supplemental tales. Whereas The Lord of the Rings constructs this interlacing narrative pattern within the pages of a massive book trilogy turned into a movie series by Peter Jackson, The Matrix constructs the interlacing narrative across a variety of media: live-action film, animation, comic books, and video games.

Within fantasy/science fiction fandom, Star Trek and Star Wars are the largest narrative franchises, with Lord of the Rings close behind, now that it has achieved a definitive film version (earlier efforts at animating Lord of the Rings fell short). The Matrix series distinguishes itself from these other narrative franchises in that its creators, brothers Larry and Andy Wachowski, come out of the fan community themselves and so rather than allowing these other narratives to erupt organically around their work, they are designing the games and other stories and films as part of the overall narrative framework of The Matrix trilogy. Thus The Animatrix shorts, like "Last Flight of the Osiris" and "Kid's Story," contribute characters and events that lead directly into the events of The Matrix Reloaded. The video game "Enter the Matrix" allows the player to play scenes that take place off screen during the movie itself: when certain characters arrive in the movie to provide aid to Neo, Trinity and Morpheus, it is because video game players have successfully navigated them to that moment of the film.

So the devoted Matrix fan is unlikely to view The Matrix Reloaded as a single entity. Not only is it necessary to have seen the first movie in order to understand the second but it is also necessary, the fan is likely to think, to see The Animatrix films and to play the video game. But this kind of encompassing narrative framework, so satisfying to the fantasy/science fiction fan, might alienate the mainstream viewer, who expects movies to be able to stand alone and is offended when a film ends with the words "to be concluded." A friend of mine noted that her son's reaction to The Matrix Reloaded was that it had no character development. As I questioned her, I learned that he had not seen the first movie, expecting the sequel to stand on its own. Interestingly enough, her other son had a similar reaction to the first Lord of the Rings movie: unfamiliar with the series, he was surprised when The Fellowship of the Ring ended before the goal had been reached. Her sons sought what West describes as an organic narrative style:

Organic unity seeks to reduce the chaotic flux of reality to manageable terms by imposing a clear and fairly simple pattern upon it. It calls for a progressive and uncluttered narrative line in which there is a single major theme to which a limited number of other themes may be related so long as they are kept subordinate. (76)

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Whereas a television series or a series of novels may be permitted an interlaced style, movies are generally expected to stand alone, designed as they are for viewing at a particular time, in a movie theater.

As directors, Peter Jackson and the Wachowki brothers are caught between their most devout fans—the ones most likely to see their movies multiple times—and the casual moviegoer who may or may not have seen the first installment or any of the supplementary material. Both Jackson and the Wachowskis are using the interlaced narrative structure of the trilogy, a common structure within fantasy/science fiction. Indeed, Jackson is constrained by his source material, Lord of the Rings having established the popularity of the structure. But the trilogy structure confronts the directors with a significant dilemma: what do you do with a movie that neither begins the story nor ends it? What do you do with a problem like The Two Towers or The Matrix Reloaded? What parts of the story will be encompassed by the second movie?

The narrative structure of Jackson's The Two Towers is quite different from Tolkien's. Jackson ends the film version of The Fellowship of the Ring with the first scene from Tolkien's The Two Towers and ends the film version of the second book before key scenes take place, probably in order to provide the film version of Fellowship of the Ring with more of a sense of resolution than the book version. An important change from book to movie involves the changed ending of the two dominant arcs of The Two Towers. Tolkien's The Two Towers is divided into two sections, the first of which follows Aragorn, Legolas, Gimli, Merry and Pippin and ends with the confrontation with Saruman at Isengard, and the second of which follows Frodo and Sam into Mordor and ends with Gollum's treachery in delivering Frodo and Sam to Shelob, the giant spider. In Tolkien's Art, Jane Chance argues that these culminating scenes represent the perversion of the mind, as exemplified by Saruman's intellect, and the perversion of the body as exemplified by Shelob's appetite, with those two perversions dominating the two sections that comprise The Two Towers. Although such organization may be philosophically coherent in book form, presenting the two sections separately would violate our sense of cinematic time. One simply doesn't ignore two main characters for half the movie and then ignore the others for the rest of the movie. Thus Jackson interweaves between the arcs, most effectively as Aragorn tracks Merry and Pippin's escape from the orcs, aspects of the story addressed in separate chapters in the book. In a way, I would argue, he is trying to construct a movie with a certain degree of organic unity, as described above by West, from a book with an interlaced narrative pattern. As a filmmaker, Jackson is constrained by time, and The Two Towers is already a very long movie. Thus the climaxes of the two sections of the book are deferred to the third movie, and new climaxes are chosen for the second. After all, Jackson must also work under the conventional constraints of the Hollywood action movie that builds toward climactic battle scenes.

Thus Jackson's The Two Towers ends with the intercut battle scenes taking place at Helm's Deep, Isengard and Osgiliath. The main characters then emerge from their respective battles ready to move on to the final film.

And yet there must be something there at the end to make the audience yearn for the last movie, to want to wait out the long months between one release and the next. The success of the franchise is dependent on an audience willing to stay to the very end of the theatrical release and it's my view that there must be a sense of looming evil that still threatens the heroes of the story.

Jackson and the Wachowskis demonstrate a different sense of how to present evil within a narrative than Tolkien does. As a novelist, Tolkien presents his tale solely from the point of view of his heroes. The plots of the villains enter the story only through the reports and speculations of the protagonists; we do not see the villains at work. But filmmakers do not have the luxury of time and so the antagonists are included as point of view-characters. Thus, we see the villains hatch their plots without the heroes' knowledge, the filmmakers using camera shots to indicate threats that the heroes are not yet fully aware of. Saruman and Gollum become point-of-view characters in The Two Towers, and Agent Smith becomes one in The Matrix Reloaded. Because we have been shown what is happening in the minds of the villains, the filmmakers can close their movies with one final shot of a character we identify as a traitor, a shot that leaves us with a sense of unease as we await the story's conclusion in the final movie.

But it seems just as important to use the second part of the story to question what was taken for granted in the first, leaving the third part to resolve paradoxes and answer questions. Granted, most narratives do just that, whether spread out over a trilogy or contained in a single movie or book. However, the second part of a trilogy needs to end with resolution still out of view in order to bring the audience back one more time. One characteristic shared by both series is this: by the end of the second installment, a villain raises questions about truths revealed to the hero in the first installment and offers new, but possibly deceptive, truths. Frodo believes he must go to the Black Gate of Mordor, only to realize when he arrives that the mission has no chance. Gollum promises him another better route, but both hides and hints at the peril of Cirith Ungol. The Oracle tells Neo that it is up to him to decide whether or not she is trustworthy, and other characters soon cast doubt on her. The Merovingian observes that Neo, Trinity and Morpheus have come to him for the Keymaker only because the Oracle told them to; they have no reason of their own for the request. Neo is told by the Architect that the Oracle was lying, but there are hints that the architect himself is not being truthful either. This sort of revelation is not unusual for middle chapters: In The Empire Strikes Back, Luke Skywalker believes Darth Vader killed his father because Obi-Wan

Kenobi told him so, only to learn that Vader is in fact his father, a shocking revelation that other movies, including Toy Story 2, have subsequently alluded to.

So to be an effective middle chapter, with neither beginning nor end, the movie must leave the audience in a state of uncertainty, waiting for the narrative to be resolved in the final film. Although the victory at Helm's Deep provides The Two Towers with a sense of cinematic closure, Jackson has Gandalf warn that the battle for Middle-Earth has only just begun, as Gollum beckons Frodo and Sam on toward Mordor. The mainstream audience is expected to wonder what will happen next, while longtime Tolkien fans wonder how Jackson will present the rest of the story. The uncertainty provided by the Wachowskis leaves the audience to wonder less about what will happen next and wonder more about what exactly has happened, for the revelations of the first movie seem to have been undermined in the second, and what seemed to have been understood no longer makes sense.

For the mainstream viewer these two middle chapters - The Two Towers and The Matrix Reloaded, may not provide the organic unity that one expects in a film, but for the fantasy/science fiction fan who relishes the interlaced narratives, they do satisfy the longing for an increasingly complex narrative world. For these fans, even the final film in either series won't complete the stories that can be told. Fan fiction and video game sessions will keep the worlds, the characters, and their stories alive.

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# Bowling For Columbine

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Salwa Ghaly

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Filmography: Written, directed and produced by Michael Moore. 2001.

MPAA Rating: R

Running Time: 2 hrs. 00 min.

THE TRAGIC EVENTS of April 20, 1999 in Littleton, Colorado, remain vivid in our collective memory: two armed teenagers stormed into Columbine High School and proceeded to shoot randomly at any colleagues and teachers in sight, killing thirteen people and injuring many more before committing suicide. In Bowling For Columbine Michael Moore, the *enfant terrible* of the American anti-establishment and author of the recent, acclaimed *Stupid White Men*, goes beyond a narrativization of this massacre to probe the reasons why the United States leads the Western world in homicides. This documentary is an informal investigation into the root causes of violence on American streets and in American homes. One obvious factor underpinning this violence is easy access to guns, ammunition and even material for home-made bombs. One of the sequences launching this impassioned exploration of American gun culture is an interview conducted by Moore in a bowling alley with a teenager who went to school with one of the Columbine killers. The young man talks nonchalantly and with complete sangfroid about how he and his dead friend would get together in their free time to make bombs and experiment with explosives, until one day they almost got themselves killed. Astonishingly, such pursuits seem perfectly normal and acceptable to that teenager, even after what happened at his high school and to his friend. So blinkered is he that Moore's caustic irony, revealed in his questions, escapes him entirely, a fact that provokes nervous laughter from the audience.

All through the documentary, we are stunned by the extent to which violence is normalized in the psyche of many of the people Moore seeks out. One scene after another betrays Middle

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America's blithe coexistence with guns, which are ubiquitous. A bank branch in a small, unidentified town comes up with the novel idea of luring customers by offering them a rifle with every new account opened. Moore walks into that branch, asks for an account "that comes with a gun," and then a few minutes later walks out triumphantly waving his weapon in the air, eliciting laughter and applause from the audience. Here again the bank teller, for whom the gun give-away is not only legal but also perfectly normal, is unable to detect Moore's sense of amusement so transparent to the viewers. Not amusing, however, is footage of Charlton Heston, president of the powerful National Rifle Association, thundering at the Mayor of Denver and threatening anyone who might try to undermine the NRA. Americans, according to him, have a God-given right to keep and bear arms. Scenes from Heston's pro-gun rally are countered by footage of grieving parents and mayhem at Columbine following the massacre. More disturbing still is the interview Moore conducts with stone-faced Heston toward the end of the film, in which the latter attributes the high incidence of violence to the multiracial character of American society. Is fear of the racial Other, then, the reason behind America's obsession and fascination with guns? We are left to ponder that question. Moore challenges the aging actor, asking why he deemed it appropriate to lead an NRA rally in Denver ten days following the Columbine massacre, and then again in Flint, Michigan, where a teenage girl had died in another shooting incident. Discomfited, Heston bows out of the interview and Moore is shown to the door of the actor's sumptuous mansion. But before leaving, he places a photograph of the slain girl against a wall. Heston, it has recently been revealed, has Alzheimer's, which might explain his absentmindedness and patent inability to field Moore's barrage of questions.

For a different perspective, Moore visits Toronto to see how Canada's largest metropolis handles the issue of gun ownership. He is informed that Torontonians feel so safe that they never lock their front doors. To test the validity of that statement, he barges into the home of a dumbfounded immigrant, apologizing profusely and dramatically! Toronto may be "New York run by the Swiss," as the familiar saying goes, but Moore discovers, to his surprise and ours, that there are seven million registered firearms in Canada, for which ammunition is readily available. Yet gun-related fatalities there are a fraction of the number in the United States. Moore does not specify what kinds of firearms are allowed in Canada, and if those include handguns. A closer look at Canada's gun laws might have buttressed his case against the NRA further. But the Toronto sequence, though amusing, seems to undercut one of the director's major arguments, namely, that easy access to guns is synonymous with a high number of homicides. If aggressive NRA lobbying in Washington indirectly causes the violent deaths of children in America, then how come Canadians are not killing other Canadians in large numbers with the millions of guns that they possess?

Aware of this loophole in the argument, Moore delves into other facets of the problem. Easy access to guns, he implies, is not the only reason why children are dying at the hands of other children in America today. Poverty, social injustice and the failure of the welfare system, which the film touches upon, albeit briefly and sketchily, are factors that need to be taken into account. Toronto does not have a “gun issue,” because it has no slums or a poverty belt, and the reason for this is that capitalism in Canada continues to have a human face, a fact the film underscores and lauds.

Moore also pays special attention to institutionalized violence and the militarization of society, which he sees as engendering social and interpersonal conflict, if only indirectly. A few miles away from Columbine High School, Lockhead-Martin has a missile-manufacturing facility employing a large number of people in the community. In juxtaposing the Columbine massacre and the military plant, Moore implies that gun crimes committed by individuals should not be dissociated from crimes perpetrated by one state against another. The argument seems to be that children become desensitized to violence when they grow up in close proximity to weapon-producing factories, when they see missiles transported through their communities, and when they hear that those missiles are being used against some nebulous “enemy” half a world away. Inevitably, some will resort to violence themselves. One of the interviewees points out that on the same day as the massacre in Colorado, US Army planes were conducting one of their worst air raids over Kosovo. The school story attracted the media’s undivided attention, while what American missiles did went largely unnoticed. Yet the two incidents are, in Moore’s mind, not coincidental, but very much part and parcel of the culture of violence he depicts and indicts. One might ask why other Western nations, including ex-colonial powers with large standing armies, are not themselves beleaguered by America’s festering gun problems. An uncharitable critic might say that Moore’s film at times delivers more impassioned statements than substantiated facts. An indulgent critic, however, is likely to forgive Moore his occasional leaps of faith.

Marrying entertainment with dead seriousness, Moore has succeeded in attracting huge numbers of viewers to his award-winning documentary, setting record-breaking box-office sales in North America and Europe. At a time when dissenters are under attack, it is gratifying to see this documentary do as well as it has, especially given that it was initially intended for a limited release. Moore’s outspokenness against right-wing elements of American society is a badly-needed antidote to the neoconservative discourse that has gained currency over the past two years. That audiences across the United States have been so receptive to this filmmaker’s message suggests that the culture

of dissent is still alive and well in America. The catharsis felt by audiences leaving the theatre is a reaction not only to the film itself but also to the like-minded enthusiasm of fellow viewers.

# Response: Bowling For Columbine and the Media

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Alan Sondheim

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IT SEEMS TO me that one point overlooked in reviews of Michael Moore's *Bowling For Columbine* is the effect of media, particularly television, on the American psyche. US news is itself saturated with violence, as Moore's documentary points out. (Much of this violence is visually attributed to people with dark skin as well.) There is a constant litany of horror, paranoia and murder, which can only lend itself to a normative worldview of violence as claims settlement. The Jerry Springer show is another example, but the atmosphere of this show goes well beyond news and talk-shows. From films to gangsta rap, violence is overdetermined to the breaking point: the representation of violence breeds violence. There is very little balance (as there is, for example, in Japan, with its manga and anime on one hand, and Apollonian culture on the other). Moore's film brings US media to the ugly surface of the culture.

The media is not, of course, the only cause of gun violence, but it's a steady contributor.