

## Hobbit, the circle closes

**In 1995, a filmmaker named Peter Jackson took an interest in the rights for the works of J. R. R. Tolkien. Today, he finds himself at the point of finishing one of the greatest cinemagraphic sagas in history. We visit an enormous, extreme shoot on the other side of the world: the third and final part of “The Hobbit.”**



Thorin, dwarf leader. / Nels Israelson / Sarah Dunn

This trip happened over time. Spring was starting in Europe and fall was just at the point of arriving in New Zealand. We deplaned at the opposite of dawn, after a plane trajectory toward the southeast of almost two days, delayed by the furiousness of a storm above the South Seas. The city of Wellington was sleeping, and the driver who picked us up at the airport gestured into the blackness while driving around Evans Bay: “Here’s where they’re shooting.” A few little lights were shining among the mountains, on the other side of the water. Maybe they continued working. It turns out to be difficult to remember all that, to relive the sensations. With the passage of months, notes in notebooks have become almost incomprehensible. “Silver light, it breaks between hills that lose themselves in the sea,” one reads in them, with a sleepy calligraphy

written in the first hour of the morning following a station wagon drive to Stone Street Studios. There the visit began to one of the grandest cinematographic enterprises ever conceived by a man. That's how things were that June 11, 2013. The filmmaker who brought to screens *The Lord of the Rings*, the monumental work of J.R.R. Tolkien, had managed to convince the Hollywood companies that he needed more days of work to complete the *Hobbit* trilogy, its prequel. The previous Christmas, the first entry in the new saga had been premiered, subtitled *An unexpected journey*, and its takings had crossed the boundary to a billion dollars, a fact with which it turned out not to be complicated to argue that he would need more time. And more money.

Sidebar: I already felt "the end" once. Now I don't know when the shoot will end

Martin Freeman, Bilbo Baggins

Up to that point, they had already been shooting for 266 days over 2011 and 2012. And in principle, that was going to be enough to capture the 300-page novel in two films. It was the initial plan. But as he finalized principal photography, Jackson noticed that he could rely on enough material to offer three parts. He would need some more length. More dialogue. More battles. So that, a little before our arrival, he was starting up his enormous filmmaking machinery: the principal actors, who came from different corners of the planet, saw each other upon return to the North Island; the ovens of WETA, the visual effects company, were going back to producing hobbit feet and weapons and suits of armor, and a legion of carpenters was pounding away ceaselessly to reconstruct the immense sets. There would be ten more weeks of filming, and Warner had decided to invite a group of journalists so that they might witness it. What the world knew about Bilbo Baggins and the thirteen dwarves, led by Thorin Oakenshield, is that they had left the Shire days ago; they had crossed the caverns of the Misty Mountains, where Bilbo had found a ring, and some eagles friendly to the wizard, Gandalf, had transported the company to a secure place after a battle with a disagreeable character called Azog who commanded a squadron of orcs. Our trajectory was shorter: the station wagon stopped in a cul de sac in a suburb of Wellington. Between wooden houses, our guide, part of Jackson's team, descended from the vehicle and said, "There's something Peter wants us to see." And here, the journey to the other side of the screen began.

Sidebar: "We never make less than 36 hobbit feet per day," says the supervisor of visual effects. That adds up to a minimum of 12,096 over the whole shoot

Crossing through an iron gate, we walk between some industrial warehouses. We see from the corner of our eyes something similar to a sculpture studio, where they are constructing sickly, twisted trees like the horns of a mythological animal: in front of us, tractors level out a little mountain of sand, and some guys above the ground examine it with surveyor's instruments. Our group stops before the façade of what looks like the biggest warehouse of all. We encounter its interior in semi-darkness, but as we get used to it, we can distinguish a wooden town whose houses are constructed like pile dwellings above a pool of water with dye in it. A bank of fog rises from a corner with a hiss and permeates it, twisting into the town. There are dead fish above the lathes. Dan Hennah, a guy with long, white, wavy hair, observes his creation and says: "There's been a battle." He's the man who sculpts Jackson's fantasies; they have worked together since the mid-nineties and Hennah won an Oscar for art direction for *The Return of the King* (2003), the last film of the previous trilogy. The film got eleven awards among those for which it was competing, putting itself at the level of *Titanic* and *Ben-Hur*. We follow Hennah through the interior of his kingdom of papier mâché, a "humid set," which in the story transformed itself into Esgaroth, Laketown. The membrane of alleys and canals includes forty-four houses whose walls, to the touch, flake away paint, leaving scraps between the fingers. The town is surrounded by green screens, to insert the background later. And all the walls and columns have been marked with little orange stickers, references for digital post-production. "This is its fifth incarnation," Hennah continues as we walk through his territory. We hear a clatter, as if of faraway work. There are workers building ceaselessly in another room. His team reconstructed this set not long ago. Tomorrow, he adds, they will begin to cut it into pieces. The end of a slow process that begins with drawings and sketches, and a seal that Jackson stamps on them with the abbreviation "V. I." (vaguely interested), which means that it's not going badly and that they should continue in that direction. "For the fortress of Erebor, we were working for four years," so Hennah. "Now we've gotten to the point that we

know what it is.” Once the sketch is approved, they make a scale model of 25 x 50 centimeters with miniatures of characters, giving the possibility to put into effect from study where the camera and the protagonists will be situated. Then they make it in real scale. But with the possibility of modifying it. You never know. In Hennah’s opinion, putting oneself at Jackson’s command presumes stepping onto unstable territory. “His team of scriptwriters keeps writing all the way through the process, so that we have a huge influx of ideas along the way. With him, nothing is ever concrete until it happens. And things change for the whole time.”

Sidebar: As far as my role goes, nothing can beat “The Fellowship of the Ring”

Ian McKellen, Gandalf

In fact, although the plan was different, immediately our guide collects us and brings us swiftly to the station wagon. Apparently, “Peter” wants us to see what he’s doing right away. “We’re going to a set with more than 100 extras,” they tell us, and read the list, “25 elves, 35 orcs, 35 humans and 35 extras.” It is mid-morning and the wheels climb a mountain. The pine trees form a vault above the road. We cross a security checkpoint. And we stop in a little square bordered by trailers on the height of a ridge. We can see Wellington on the other side of the bay. Movement of people above the muddy ground. People cross with reflective vests. A woman with makeup gear. A man with two Red Bulls in his hand. Some orc masks with their expressions frozen, on a table. At the far side, some heaping freight containers form a structure similar to a bull plaza. They open the doors and we go in. At this instant, the sun filters through the clouds and strikes the peasants from the front. They make way for us. They’re dressed in rags and they lift their dirty faces. They look at us like we’re aliens. We climb some rock stairs. Take time to look over part of the set: a city of rock through which a ball of fire appears to have crossed. Dry, scorched branches climb the walls. A deity rises from a frozen fountain. There’s no time for more. They introduce us in a tent of black cloth. Inside there’s a monitor in which we can read “live.” In the image, in 3D, Peter Jackson appears to be crossing on the left. A hand appears and cleans the lens; across it we can see another square, with corpses piled everywhere. The place has the quality of a mountain village in Central Europe. Not by accident. “Our journey begins in Tolkien’s Europe and we are moving East,” Hennah had advised us. In the monitor, a guy pierced by an arrow lifts his head, casts a look, and goes back to lying still. Another person, dressed for the twenty-first century, walks by throwing out handfuls of salt. We look back briefly to see Jackson giving instructions in a passageway. A woman sprays blood on the cadavers. An enormous fan blows away some little white bundles that are floating through the air. In my hand, they dissolve like soap. Hennah, who’s walking along here as well, tells us that we find ourselves in Dale, the city in the valley, during the Battle of the Five Armies; that the dragon has been vanquished and the dwarves find themselves isolated in the Lonely Mountain, around here in the story. “It’s the climax of the final film,” he recounts. We will be able to see it in theaters in Spain beginning approximately from next December 17. A horn silences his words. The image on the screen shows a clapperboard with the number 344 written on it. Strike. A voice calls over the set, “Action!”



Isolated: Due to matters of proportion, he never shot a scene in the same frame as Martin Freeman (Bilbo).

During the following minutes, they shoot the same scene from two opposing angles. More or less the following happens, some six or seven times. On one side of the square, a group of orcs climbs some staircases violently, kills a few villagers armed with rakes, and continues on its way; on the other side Thranduil (Lee Pace) appears, with long, platinum blond hair, a sword in each hand, and a tunic the color of the moon. He looks to his side, watching. Leader of a squadron of elves. We hear a cracked, cavernous voice: "My lord!" and then the grey figure of Gandalf (Ian McKellen) appears and says to Thranduil:

-There's no time! We have to alert Thorin.

-I will take what I came to find and go.

-My lord, please ... We have to let them know.

–We have poured too much elvish blood on this accursed ground. No more!

Two horns sound. The dead bodies stand up. Seconds later, the group of elves crosses in front of our tent and leaves the set. It smells of plaster of Paris and fresh paint. An orc rests with its mask in its lap. Some workers take the chance to eat some fruit. It's lunchtime, and we gather around Carlos Ramírez Laloli, a Mexican film lover who dropped everything at home and moved to New Zealand on the day that he read in the daily paper that his countryman Guillermo del Toro would direct *The Hobbit*. That was in 2008. He got a big fat nothing in pre-production. Two years later, Del Toro decided to leave the project, due to constant delays in the beginning of filming; the distributor, Metro Goldwyn Mayer, was in bankruptcy. *The Hobbit* remained an orphan, but Ramírez stayed on the island. And when Jackson decided to take the reins of the adaptation, and Warner Bros. put a number around 500 million dollars on the table, he stayed hooked. The Mexican is an assistant in post-production. And he says that the darkest parts of the trilogy retain something of Del Toro's vision. While we eat under some awnings, we see members of the team playing Frisbee on a field with the waters of Cook Strait at their base. They run barefoot on the lawn. This country, at times, reminds one of Hobbiton. But not always. On the shoot they work 11 hours, with a break of 45 minutes to eat. And it easily extends to 12 or 13 hours. There was even one 18 hour day, Ramírez says. The actors get up at four in the morning to begin with their prosthetics. Jackson's internal engine imposes a devilish rhythm. The script, which the filmmaker wrote together with his wife, Fran Walsh, and Philippa Boyens, remains live (the trio had already written the adaptation of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy together). Each day, new lines appear, which Jackson tries to interweave during the battle, prolonging it by 20 or 25 minutes. "No one knows how it will end," the Mexican says.

Sidebar: The last meters [of film] are the hardest, where the great films turn out to be a test of stamina, says director Peter Jackson

Back in the canvas tent, scriptwriter Philippa Boyens appears, dressed in a blue pullover and spectacles. She has the air of a professor. She's considered one of the greatest experts on the work of Tolkien, whom she calls "Professor Tolkien." This knowledge was worth an Oscar to her. But with the first installment of *The Hobbit* there were negative critiques, above directed against the development of a story that, because it was so stretched out, remained an empty shell. Many complained that the dwarves sang too much, slowing down the epic. She says that the strain feels alleviated: "We always thought that the first one would be the most difficult. In contrast to *The Lord of the Rings*, it's not initially a heroic adventure, it's more eccentric, a children's story. We had to introduce 13 new characters, and that's delicate. I understand the skepticism. But we have to have faith that we know what we're doing." Just as the novel of *The Hobbit* was short in comparison to *The Lord of the Rings*, the team investigated all the writings and appendices of "the professor" in order to lengthen the plot. For example, Gandalf appears and disappears in the book, but we never know where he's going. In the movies we follow him "in real time," Boyens explains. "And you discover what he discovers. What demons are in Dol Guldur? What's happening in the world?" Sauron, although he is not called by this name in *The Hobbit*, remains a central part of the story. They begin to sketch out the dark periods that Tolkien did not think to include in this novel, but that would conform to the background of *The Lord of the Rings*. He wrote them in order. First the story of Bilbo (1937), then that of his nephew Frodo (1954). Jackson filmed them in reverse. But he wanted to leave them tied together. He intends them as a single work. Probably the biggest adventure to date. By size and length. When they premiere *The Battle of the Five Armies*, the saga of Middle Earth will take up more than seventeen hours of film, more than 800 million Euros will have been invested in them, and their gross receipts will be around 4800 million (at the moment it's around 3900). [Translator's note: Spanish figures left as is. In U.S. English a thousand million = a billion.]

The creator of this whole universe was born on Halloween. He's 53 years old. Before he was 10 years of age, he began to film with a Super 8. At 20 he began to shoot his first large format film. It was called *Bad Taste* and today it is a cult work of gore cinema. In it, he did everything. From the makeup to the main characters. The others were friends. It took him four years to make it. Today he is one of seven filmmakers with Oscars as writer, producer and director of the same film (*The Return of the King*). One of three select people with two films that made more than a million dollars. On the set, they call him "The Voice."

Sidebar: “Twenty years from now you will say to your grandchildren: Begin with the first one and see them in order,” explains Peter Jackson

Not all the performers like his method. First he gives them directions above ground. Then he takes refuge in his canvas tent and from there he directs by megaphone. Speakers are distributed throughout the set. The metallic voice of the director booms. Hidden behind the curtain like the Wizard of Oz. His tent is forbidden territory. From it he controls everything. On screens, he sees what the main unit is shooting, and the material arrives live as well that the splinter unit, smaller and more agile, is filming. Usually far from here. We see it at work the second day at Stone Street Studios, filming some filler scenes that have already appeared in the second film: Bilbo and the dwarves walking through the Mirkwood. From his tent, kilometers away, Jackson corrects camera angles, organizes and finally approves the scenes “in some gap in between what he’s shooting,” according to Chris Rivers, director of this auxiliary unit and one of Jackson’s knights for the last 22 years: he began with him at 17 drawing the storyboard of another gore film: *Braindead*. In his tent, Jackson is also cutting and editing as sequences arrive. And he keeps meetings with the rest of the departments. When we visit the main offices of WETA, the visual effects empire responsible for the whole saga of Middle Earth, its director, Richard Taylor, tell us that Jackson visited him that morning in order to approve the miniature of a carriage that will enter combat in three weeks: 70 of his employees are running at “100 miles an hour,” in his words, to supply the five armies. Concretely, we find them in the process of the fourth repainting of 96 suits of armor for the orcs of Gundabad. “The color is crucial, with which you paint the film,” says Taylor, on the search for an “industrial metallic gray.” He teaches us weapons. Of steel and of foam. Of orcs, elves and men. The prosthetic of “gel of encapsulated silicon acrylic” with which they exaggerate the features of the dwarves, capable of regulating temperature and refracting light in the same way that human flesh does. “Shooting in high definition, at 6K, in 3D and at 48 frames per second has required us to rise to another level.” He told us of hobbit feet of the latest technology, for the fabrication of which they use a mold made of the same material as space ships, the only thing capable of withstanding the compression that reduces the fake skin to 0.1 microns. “We never produce fewer than 36 feet per day,” he says. Taking into account 336 days of filming, that adds up to a minimum of 12,096 hobbit feet.



Warrior. One of the woodland elves, “more savage and less wise” than those of *The Lord of the Rings*.

The actor Martin Freeman (Bilbo) is being shod in a pair of them this instant. We see him on the side of a monitor from our tent, facing Ian McKellen (Gandalf). Peter Jackson can be found with them. He gives notes. Appears tired. Rubs his forehead. It begins to darken. He leaves and the horn blasts. It snows. The camera turns to Bilbo. His face is covered in blood and he says:

–I am not asking your permission. Those are my friends up there.

–But they will see you ... and they will kill you.

–No, they won’t kill me..

–If you go, I will not be able to protect you..

–I know ...

And as Freeman disappears from the scene, Jackson's voice bursts from across the loudspeakers "Martin, more excited and with more energy." Freeman responds to the air: "Yes, yes ..." He acts the next attempt with greater emphasis: "I am not asking your permission!" And the voice: "Good. That's great." They go on repeating it in this way until take 10, when the director stops.

A little later, Jackson manifests himself in our tent. The first thing that surprises us about him is his diminutive stature; he has long hair, messy and stringy, and a shirt so wrinkled he appears to have slept a week in it. A cup of tea steams in his hand. Chubby cheeks, an incipient belly, and a pointy nose help to confer on him the quality of a hobbit. He sits in a chair and says, "Look, what I am attempting here, and it's deliberate, and I imagine that if you take the novel of *The Hobbit* and you see that it is somewhat different ... What's in the back of my head is that in twenty years, long after these commercial screenings in December, when all this has disappeared, you will say to your grandchildren: 'Begin with the first one and see them all in order.' We are very aware that the final sense of what we are doing will be captured in a series of six films. There's a kind of construction, a tone of development, things in the characters that will more or less guide you up to what happens in *The Lord of the Rings*. That's our strategy." A counter-clockwise strategy to close a circle that began in 1995, when he took an interest in the status of the cinema rights to Tolkien's works. He has spent almost 20 years in Middle Earth. This is the finale of the journey. And this demands shooting simultaneously while tying up all the loose ends of the second and third installments. Adding bits. Rewriting. Editing both films at the same time. "It's the last meters of film, the hardest ones, where the great films come back to being a test of stamina," Jackson says. And then someone yells, "The sun is going down." The illusionist gets up to continue with the puzzle.

Sidebar: I feel like I am going to create part of cinema history

Evangeline Lilly, Tauriel

On the next day, Richard Armitage, the actor who plays Thorin, the leader of the dwarves, told us an anecdote that painted this fever of the director in the definitive mile. "I wrote him an email this morning with a question about some lines that we were going to shoot." He responded immediately. And in the response, he told him that he had gotten up at 1 to work on the script. "Secretly," Armitage said, "he had been setting his alarm at one in the morning, writing *The Battle of the Five Armies*, and then going to the set to shoot for 12 hours." The actor was half-dressed as a dwarf. He could hardly hear because of the latex in his ears. "He has the whole movie in his mind," he added. "It's a symphony in three acts."

Jackson knows the tune. But many of the actors confess a certain unease with what they've been shooting. "The whole time I have to be asking Peter, 'Where are we?'" Ian McKellen recounts, in our tent again. The sequence that he just finished shooting, he assures, was written three days ago. Martin Freeman expresses a different version of this confusion: "I already felt *the end* one time. Now I am not convinced that we will ever finish." They have just concluded their scene together. When they shoot, they look at each other and reply to each other. But they are never together in the frame, at least not in the physical sense of the word. A matter of proportions. If they appear on the same level, they are recording in separate locations. With an earphone in order to follow the dialogue. And a little stick with a photo of the other at the height of the face. McKellen has come to be filmed with as many sticks as dwarves. He has spent the great part of this shoot in a green room, alone, surrounded by rods with photos of warty faces. "It is a very strange experience, something alienating, very desolate," he says. The wizard has taken off pieces of fake skin that still stick to his hand. A wool hat covers his shaved head. Someone asks him how long he's been going and coming to New Zealand. "Thirteen years!" he replies. He is not the only veteran. "The majority of the people that you see out here have been working on this film as long as I have. I have seen them grow up, fall in love, have children, some have died," he says. But he adds that that some things happen only once. The Fellowship of the Ring, for example: the group formed by Elijah Wood, Viggo Mortenson, Orlando Bloom, and the rest; the nine main characters of *The Lord of the Rings*. "They all knew that it would probably be the most important film of their careers. On this film, everyone took it very well. But I don't believe that there are tattoos." Before leaving, he uncovers his shoulder and shows his. A new text in elvish, a memory of that shoot.



Bilbo. According to Ian McKellen (Gandalf), the halflings represent "the common man who saves the day."

Outside of our tent, the light of sunset is floating. We take advantage of the break to walk down by Dale. We get lost among its rock mazes. While we stroke a plastic icicle that hangs from a cornice, a guy appears stealthily at our shoulder. Peter Jackson. He still has a cup of tea in his hands. He's wearing muddy mountain boots and his trouser legs are rolled up. His eyes are an electric blue. As, on the side, a worker strikes the set, I ask him if it bothers him that all of this will be destroyed soon. "But it will survive in the film," he replies. Then he yells to the worker, "You are going to make little pieces, eh!" And he adds as if for himself, "They are going to make little pieces ... but that won't happen tomorrow." Just as a hobbit would, after pronouncing these words, Jackson goes up in smoke, without making a sound. We will not return to see him. There are still seven weeks of shooting ahead of him.