

Messengers from the Stars. Episode IV

Lisbon, Portugal, 16 – 18 November 2016

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November 2016 saw the fourth edition (or “episode”) of the international conference on science fiction and fantasy, organised by the School of Arts and Humanities of the University of Lisbon (Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa (FLUL)), Mensageiros das estrelas/Messengers from the Stars. Launched in 2010, the biannual and bilingual conference (Portuguese and English being the official languages) brought together more than eighty participants, who presented their research in eight sessions, each including three to four panels (a total of four panels were entirely in Portuguese).

Spread across two Conference days, there were eighty-four stimulating presentations on a wide variety of topics, from hit-series such as *Game of Thrones* (José Malheiro Magalhães), *The Simpsons* (I-Hsuan Lee), *Xena the Warrior Princess* (Ana Durão), and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Joana Sevilha), to phantasmagoria in short stories by J.L. Borges (Alia Soliman), queer subtext in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2* (David Klein Martins), the social power of fandom and LGBT communities (Francisca Alvarenga), dystopias, corporality, and zombies (entire panels were dedicated to each of the last three topics). Readers of *Libri & Liberi* will be pleased to know that children’s and young adult fiction assumed a prominent place within the Conference. In addition to numerous individual presentations dedicated to popular authors of fantasy for children/young adults, such as C.S. Lewis (Mariza da Silva Martins), Neil Gaiman (Diogo Almeida), and J.R.R. Tolkien (Miguel Troncão, Aitor Seijas, and also a separate panel on the topic of nature and place in Middle-earth), an entire panel was dedicated to children’s fantasy literature and media in general.

The panel (entitled “Children’s Literature and Fantasy”) opened with a presentation by Anna Mik on Walt Disney Animation Studio’s hit film *Frozen* (2013). The focus was on the main character Elsa, whose journey (and especially her personal anthem “Let It Go”) of self-discovery and self-acceptance was interpreted as a liberation fantasy, and analysed in relation to the concept of “(ab)normality”. The topic of the paper delivered by Maciej Skowera was Lev Grossman’s novel *The Magicians* (2009), which was examined within the framework of “classical children’s fantasy novels”. The author explored the ways in which Grossman’s novel (the first in a trilogy of the same name) conforms to and departs from the said model by using a concept he termed “adulterated children’s literature”. In the presentation intriguingly entitled “The Authentic Alice and the Wrong Alice”, Tzu-Ying Lin compared Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* novels and their most recent film adaptations: Tim Burton’s *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) and James Bobin’s *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* (2016).

Papers on children’s and YA fantasy/sci-fi were featured in other panels as well. Dubbing Roald Dahl the “modern British catcher in the rye”, Lucia Martín analysed power relations between children and adults in his 1988 novel *Matilda*, highlighting the biographical elements (especially Dahl’s highly unpleasant experiences with the British education system) the story draws on. In anticipation of Disney’s latest live-action film *Beauty and the Beast* (at that time still not released in cinemas), Elena Raicu discussed three previous film adaptations of the popular “tale as old as time”: Jean Cocteau’s *La belle et la*

bête (1946), Eugene Marner's *Beauty and the Beast* (1987), and Christophe Gans' *La belle et la bête* (2014).

Two papers were dedicated to the popular *Harry Potter* series: using the examples of J.K. Rowling's novels (and especially the *Pottermore* website) and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (and accompanying correspondence between Tolkien and readers curious to learn more about Middle-earth), Anahit Behrooz explored the notion of text as a mutable and continuously evolving entity, which the author and readers constantly rework with the help of paratextual and supplementary elements. Ekaitz Icazuriaga addressed the representation of gender in the first book in Rowling's series, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, by analysing the character of Hermione Granger.

In addition to participants' presentations, the two Conference days were filled to the brim with various other attractive events, such as the Conference dinner and closing ceremony, the "Horizontes de João Aguiar" exhibition, mounted in the FLUL Library, a meeting of the "Devoradores de livros" [Book Eaters] book club, a conversation with the award-winning Scottish sci-fi writer Ken MacLeod, author of the *Fall Revolution* series (1995–1999), and the *Engines of Light* (2000–2002) and *The Corporation Wars* (2016–2017) trilogies, and two keynotes.

The first keynote, Katherine Fowkes' "A Deal with the Devil? Zombies vs. Tricksters as Cinematic Magic" presented the lifeless zombie and the trickster who, as Fowkes explained, breathes new life into people and situations by creating mischief and chaos, as antipodes of sorts. The author then used the two figures as metaphors for films which, in their "zombie" forms, rely on stereotypes and "soul-less", clichéd stories. In contrast, "trickster" films (genres such as fantasy and sci-fi) re-ignite the audience's imagination, inviting them to view the world around them in a new light. In the second keynote, Andrew M. Butler analysed Alex Garland's 2015 sci-fi film *Ex Machina*, especially its intertextual links with the myth of Pygmalion and Charles Perrault's fairy tale "Bluebeard".

For the duration of the Conference, the FLUL building also housed another highly attractive event: a sci-fi and fantasy market, where aficionados could purchase a variety of pop-culture-themed items, such as movie posters, badges featuring famous TV characters, hand-knit Pokémon balls and Cthulhu toys fashioning charming bowler hats. Hopefully, they too will return in 2018, for the Messengers' fifth "episode".

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The Child and the Book International Conference

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It seemed as if the 2016 Child and the Book Conference in Wrocław had only just ended, but here we found ourselves at the Child and the Book again, this time in Valencia, at the Tarongers Campus of the University of Valencia. This year's topic was "Interdisciplinary Links between Children's Literature and the Arts", and the whole affair was interdisciplinary indeed: there were educators, linguists, literature scholars, film scholars, artists, and art historians, translation scholars and literacy experts; we talked about music, art, picturebooks, adaptations, illustrations, cognitive approaches, ekphrasis, education strategies, apps, and