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# The World Hobbit Project at Cardiff University, UK

By Minna Siikilä*

 Me, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen and Maria Ruotsalainen had the great pleasure to attend The Fantasies of Contemporary Culture symposium held by Cardiff University's School of English, Communication and Philosophy on May 23, 2016. The symposium focused on exploring the political and cultural functions of fantasy. All in all, this one-day event included eight panel sessions, and two keynotes; Doctor Mark Bould (UWE Bristol) and Doctor Catherine Butler (Cardiff University).



**Cardiff University. The Fantasies of Contemporary Culture symposium can be found with #cultfantasies on Twitter.**
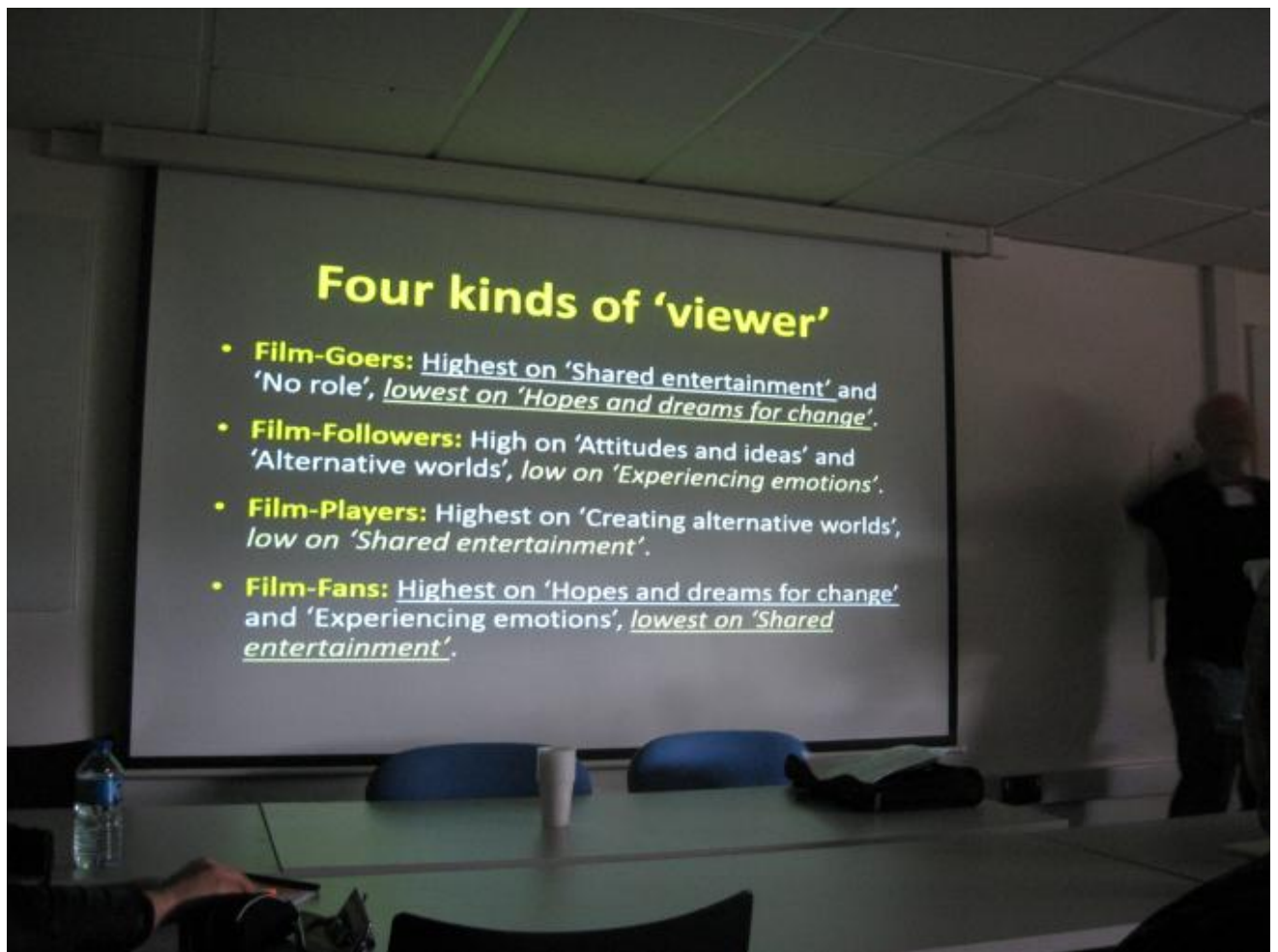
**Aino-Kaisa Koistinen and Martin Barker discussing** *The Hobbit* **project.**

What is specifically relevant for this blog is that the symposium had a separate session, "The Hobbit: There and Back Again", dedicated to research on *The Hobbit* films. There were three separate presentations, of which two addressed The World Hobbit Project directly. The first presentation was held by one of The World Hobbit Project's principal researchers, Emeritus Professor Martin Barker from Aberystwyth University. In his talk "Experiencing Powerfully: How Audiences Find Meaning in Fantasy Films" Barker argued that according to his studies audiences can view *The Hobbit* trilogy as a political story, where "small

people" can change the world. In this way fantasy is a new way of "saying out loud", expressing the unsayable.

As Barker stated: "… the more audiences appreciated these trilogies, the more they felt able to locate a certain kind of politics in their experiences of them". As a reference Barker used anthropologist James C Scott's "Weapons of the Weak" (1985) and "Domination and the Arts of Resistance" (1990). Barker also discussed his findings on different types of viewers, and the relationship of the original book and the film trilogy as experienced by these viewers.



**Martin Barker distinguished four kinds of viewers from his data.**

The second presentation on this session was by Doctor Aino-Kaisa Koistinen and PhD students Maria Ruotsalainen and Tanja Välisalo, as representatives of *Uses of Fantasy – World Hobbit Project in Finland*. Tanja Välisalo, one of the presenters of this paper, could unfortunately not take part in the seminar, so only Koistinen and Ruotsalainen presented their paper. The paper was called "*The Hobbit* Films and Transmedial Practices: The World Hobbit Project in Finland". The paper discussed the Finnish audience's transmedial practices and take on the meanings of fantasy.

When discussing transmedial practices, Koistinen and Ruotsalainen used Henry Jenkins's (2008) term "transmedia storytelling", which refers to the ways a story unfolds via various media platforms. Koistinen and Ruotsalainen emphasized that "although *The Hobbit* films are adaptations, engaging with T*he Hobbit* can be a transmedial practice". From Finnish respondents 77% had engaged in what Koistinen and Ruotsalainen call *transmedial user practices*, like debating the films, commenting online, collecting merchandise, gaming and producing fan art. All in all, there were 1614 respondents in the Finnish online enquiry, and the responses indicated that most of the transmedia users were 16–25-year-old women.

When discussing their findings on meanings of fantasy according to their respondents, Koistinen and Ruotsalainen concluded that the answers commonly implicates an affectional relationship between the respondents and the world created by J. R. R. Tolkien (or, in some cases, Peter Jackson), and the significance to one's personal history and growth was mentioned often. In addition, respondents had stated that they enjoyed the feeling of immersion and escape in Tolkien's world. In many cases watching *The Hobbit* also provided a way to belong to a community and to share memories with friends or family.

**Maria Ruotsalainen and Aino-Kaisa Koistinen combined quantitative and qualitative methods in their research.**

My own presentation was called "'I'm just being a difficult lotr hardcore fan': How Fandom and Anti-Fandom Manifest Themselves in Online Conversations About Peter Jackson's *Hobbit*trilogy". In this paper I discussed my tentative findings in two different online conversation threads (Wired & Facebook); 986 independent messages in total. Both conversations occurred in relation to an article discussing *The Hobbit* movies. The themes of these online conversations dealt with questions about the creative powers and artistic preferences of Peter Jackson and J. R. R. Tolkien, and about the concern whether it is right to make an adaptation about this canonical book at all. Tolkien's fans were very protective at times, and all in all it was very clear, that the original text was seen more valuable than the movies.

**Ethan Gilsdorf's article on Wired received 941 online comments from readers.**

Many fans thought that Jackson had manhandled Tolkien's original text too badly, and some Tolkien-fans even declared that they are boycotting Jackson's *The Hobbit* trilogy altogether. In some cases, being a fan of Tolkien also meant being *an anti-fan* of Jackson, meaning that there was a binary opposition between Tolkien and Jackson that invited anti-fandom. There were conversations about making a pure fan-edition from *The Hobbit* movies, as well. This kind of activity was in line with Henry Jenkins' (1992) well-known observations about the fact that fans are keen on producing their own aesthetic works "that speak to the special interests of the fan community". On the other hand, there were also Jackson-fans, who defended him, and Tolkien-fans, who took Jackson's movies in stride, or enjoyed them.

At the moment I'm working on my quantitative analysis. In the future I'm also going to reflect my results to *The World Hobbit Project's* results to see, how much correlation there is. On my own behalf I would like to thank our session's chair, Doctor William Proctor (Bournmouth University), and everyone who took part in our *Hobbit* session. This was very inspiring, beneficial and also great fun.



**Before heading back to Finland we visited Cardiff's beautiful castle.**

*Minna Siikilä is a PhD student of Contemporary Culture in University of Jyväskylä and an affiliate member of *Uses of Fantasy – The World Hobbit Project in Finland*.

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