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A Conference Report from Uses of Fantasy in Changing Media Landscapes Seminar

Minna Siikilä

“In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit” (Tolkien 11).

From this opening line of *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again* it all began 79 years ago in United Kingdom. From this epic quest that J. R. R. Tolkien wrote for his children sprung also *The Hobbit* film trilogy (2012–2014) directed by Peter Jackson. This wildly popular although also vastly critiqued trilogy caught the attention of academic researchers. And so The World Hobbit Project was born. Led by Professor Emeritus Martin Barker from Aberystwyth University, UK, The World Hobbit Project also landed in Finland, University of Jyväskylä, where the Research Centre for Contemporary Culture took it under its wings. Here in Finland this international research project carries the name Uses of Fantasy, and it was evident, that sooner or later there will be a conference named alike. As an affiliate member of Uses of Fantasy – The World Hobbit Project in Finland I now have a great pleasure to give a conference report on this inspirational event, Uses of Fantasy in Changing Media Landscape, that took place 20–21 October 2016 at the University of Jyväskylä.

As the name of the conference predicted, there were many presentations about the different ways that fantasy plays a role in our everyday lives. The first keynote speaker, professor Emerita Liisa Rantalaiho (University of Tampere, Finland) addressed some common fallacies about fantasy’s alleged uselessness in her aptly named talk “Using Fantasy”. She argued that fantasy actually has many natural and beneficial functions to human beings, like the Harry Potter Alliance, that aims to empower transgender people and make their lives better. Also another keynote speaker, Associate Professor Susana Tosca (IT University of Copenhagen, Denmark) discussed the functional, sometimes very empowering significance of fantasy to its fans in her talk called “Fantasy Transmediations: The Art of Making it Real”. For example, Tosca talked about a little girl, who was bullied at school, but who found strength when wearing a *Frozen* costume, because Elsa was different too, like her. To our great pleasure also the leader of the global World Hobbit Project, Martin Barker, had agreed to attend the seminar as a keynote speaker. His talk “On Being Disappointed with *The Hobbit*: Indications of the Changing Significance of Fantasy” addressed the fact that for real fans Jackson’s *The Hobbit* trilogy was more disappointing than for those moviegoers who didn’t have such a personal relationship to Tolkien’s works.

In addition to the keynotes, there were also smaller panel presentations. In comparison to Barker’s talk, a presentation titled “Between Mourning and Ridicule: Memes Reacting to the Death of the *Game of Thrones* Character Hodor” offered a lighter tone on the uses of fantasy. This visually rich and timely presentation held by Susanne Ylönen and Heidi Kosonen observed the many side-effects and by-products that the death of a fictional fantasy character can bring. For example, IKEA started to manufacture door stoppers named after the beloved character, and for some *Game of Thrones* fans this seemed like trolling. On the other hand, this phenomena could also be seen as a

homage. Game of Thrones was also the subject of Anna-Leena Harinen's presentation "What Kind of Adaptation is Game of Thrones?" where she problematized the traditional views about adaptation. Harinen pointed out that fighting between different mediums is unnecessary, although a vast majority of people still endorse loyalty to the original text.

The Finnish segment of The World Hobbit Project was, of course, a central theme of this Uses of Fantasy seminar. Professor Raine Koskimaa introduced some basic data from the research done in Finland so far. He told the audience that in this research qualitative and quantitative methods are combined to find out, for example, "what is the meaning of fantasy to the respondents and what does fantasy bring to their lives". Also transmedial strategies of media use and national, territorial and cultural effects to meaning-making are being studied. In Finnish survey there were 1614 respondents, so the study material is vast.

Also some members of the Hobbit research team presented their findings. Jyrki Korpua and Maria Ruotsalainen talked about *The Hobbit* in relation to the concept of sacredness. They asked for example: "In which way is the *Hobbit* book sacred amongst the respondents, if at all?" In another presentation Tanja Välisalo discussed two main protagonists of *The Hobbit* films: Bilbo Baggins and the dragon Smaug. Välisalo stated that "reception of the character can be positive even if the movie is disappointing". All in all Uses of Fantasy seminar had many interesting themes. For example comics and science fiction were vastly represented, and even Pablo Escobar's magic world "La Hacienda Napoles" was discussed.

The closure of the two-day seminar was a panel where the keynotes Tosca and Barker accompanied by University of Jyväskylä's Urpo Kovala, Raine Koskimaa and Irma Hirsjärvi discussed the future alignments of fantasy research. Koskimaa stated that there is a big cultural change happening. One can for example live on playing video games, like YouTube sensation PewDiePie is doing. Barker added that a dramatic shift is really going on, and rich fantasy has become a positive thing, and it's "becoming a part of everyday life". Hirsjärvi made a note about this particular shift in Finland, where attitudes towards fantasy became more appreciating after Johanna Sinisalo won the highly valued Finlandia literary award with her scifi/fantasy novel *Ennen päivänlaskua ei voi* (*Not before sundown*, 2000). Koskimaa and Kovala also made a point that sacredness, spirituality and neo-religiousness have begun to rise in today's culture at a general level. As a curiosity Tosca added to this that some people are now turning from common religions to old pagan religions. They can believe for example in Thor. So it can be said that old myths are coming back to life in some very interesting ways. New research topics on fantasy could be, for example, the functions of fantasy – such as escape and empowerment – and the ways that audiences relate to characters. In addition to this Urpo Kovala demanded more research on transmediality, and Hirsjärvi stated that the field of drama as a whole is worth a closer study. Barker also wished some research about bookstores' relationship to fantasy and scifi. Right now bookstores don't know how to label all the new sub-genres, because the field of fantasy and scifi is expanding and changing all the time in a very dynamic way.

Work Cited

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Hobbit or There and Back Again*. 1937. HarperCollins Children's Books, 2013.