



MESSENGERS FROM THE STARS  
ON SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

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*Messengers from the Stars: On Science Fiction and Fantasy*

No. 7 – 2025

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Ana Daniela Coelho

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Photo: Elisa Azevedo

## **EDITORIAL**

Ana Daniela Coelho

In its simplest definition, adaptation is the transposition of a story to a medium or format other than the one it was initially created for. For a long time, adaptation materialised, both in artistic and critical conceptions, in novel-to-screen transpositions, which, in turn, gave way to a discourse that virtually ignored other media and formats and almost invariably classified adaptations as inferior to the original works from which they had stemmed. Such a discourse often left out two of the most significant aspects of adaptation: that it is a process of reappropriation of the past and a marker of contemporaneity.

As adaptation studies redefined themselves in recent years, key publications in the field (Hutcheon 2013 [2006]; Sanders 2016 [2006]; Cartmell and Whelehan 2010), although still relevant, have been joined by more recent debates, broadening the scope and reach of adaptation, both inside and outside the academic environment (Newell 2017; Leitch 2017, Elleström 2010, Elliott 2020). Such movement has acknowledged the broader scope of adaptation, which includes a variety of cultural products as well as the possibility of diverse intermedia exchanges.

On the other hand, adaptation, whether recognised as such or not, has long been a staple in Fantasy and Sci-Fi productions of different media. Moreover, in face of the undeniable importance of streaming and the increasing number of new productions, this tendency has only grown stronger in recent years, as the plethora of available material is joined by multiple-platform strategies, where both narrative and audience engagement are enhanced. Thus, given the area's well-known experimental and innovative drive, the contribution of Fantasy and Sci-Fi adaptations to the overall rethinking of the field of adaptation studies cannot be overlooked. This issue of *Messengers from the Stars* aims at delving deeper into the topics of streaming and adaptation of Fantasy and Sci-Fi works, in particular objects that exploit the new capacities brought about by new platforms, namely transmedia strategies and enriched audience participation.

This is the case in the first article, Inês Vaz's "Bringing Fantasy Animation into a New Era: Monstrous Representations in Netflix's *Nimona*", which looks into a streaming animation adaptation of the science fantasy graphic novel *Nimona* (2015) by ND Stevenson. Initially a webcomic, *Nimona* is a perfect example of how storytelling has evolved in recent years, thriving online while still able to adapt to the new screen reality of streaming platforms. Vaz's analysis focuses on how the adaptive process works with and transforms its source object, taking into consideration today's ruthless market interests as well as unavoidable issues of sexual diversity and representativity while delving into traditional fantasy tropes.

Ricardo Sobreira, in "The Adaptation of Ridley Scott's Sci-Fi Series *Raised by Wolves* from Video Streaming to Comic Book", takes the inverse look by choosing an adaptation from a streaming-based series to a comic book. While focusing on the object at hand, Sobreira also delves into the importance of fan communities and expanded forms of interaction. He defends the concept of *novelization* while integrating others, such as transmediation and extension, to better define and present *Raised by Wolves # 1: Hark, the Herald Angel Sings* (2020) by Aaron Guzikowski as an object of its own merit rather than a mere mirror of the series.

In "Hell Hath No Fury: The Madonna-Whore Dichotomy in HBO's *House of the Dragon*", Duncan Hubber examines one of the unavoidable examples of fantasy adaptation to streaming platforms: *House of the Dragon* (2022-), the prequel to the paradigm-shifter in screen and streaming adaptation, *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019). Focusing on the theme of female power, Hubber closely analyses the onscreen portrayal

of Alicent and Rhaenyra's characters, as they were meaningfully expanded from G. R. R. Martin's novellas.

In "Myth & Folklore in Popular Media: Folk Horror in the Age of Streaming", Carlos Carneiro investigates how myth and folklore have systematically been used on screen, particularly via Fantasy and Sci-fi productions. From Carneiro's viewpoint – and just like the case argued in the beginning of this introduction for adaptation itself – folk horror and its myths prove themselves particularly adaptable to both contemporaneity and streaming media, recasting centuries-old stories and themes to successfully engage modern-day audiences.

As usual, the journal closes with two reviews, which keep within the theme selected for this issue. In the first one, Alexis F. Viegas reviews Andrei Nae's *Immersion, Narrative, and Gender Crisis in Survival Horror Videogames* (Routledge, 2022), bringing much-needed attention to the critical discourse of videogames. In the second, Mareike Huber reviews *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* (Amazon Prime, 2022-) from the perspective of the on-screen use of Tolkien's invented languages.

Thanks to all its contributors, this volume from *Messengers from the Stars* offers insightful and valuable contributions to the study of Fantasy and Sci-Fi in adaptations in the age of streaming platforms and evolving audiences. May they set the example and inspire the need to not only continue to enjoy the ever-growing number of new productions but also to question the meaning and significance of these products in our society.



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## MONOGRAPH SECTION





Photo: Elisa Azevedo

## **Bringing Fantasy Animation into a New Era: Monstrous Representations in Netflix's *Nimona***

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**Abstract** | In a time where studios and streaming services are thriving on fantasy reboots, prequels, sequels, and live-action adaptations, let us not forget another essential pillar of fantasy fiction: animation. This article starts with a brief commentary on fantasy animation productions for streaming and then focuses on the analysis of one of the most recent works from the *Netflix* catalogue: *Nimona* (2023), a Troy Quane and Nick Bruno adaptation of ND Stevenson's graphic novel of the same name. This paper intends to look at the relationship between the original and the adaptation, giving special attention to the monstrous figures they feature, highlighting the way certain characters are represented in order to subvert core tropes of fantasy fiction such as monsters, villains, heroes, and the relationship between good and evil. The main goal is to ascertain how streaming companies are influencing the development of such works, and how these, in turn, are contributing to the development of fantasy fiction.

**Keywords** | Fantasy Animation; Adaptation; Streaming; Monstrous figures; *Nimona*



**Resumo** | Numa altura em que o sucesso dos estúdios e serviços de *streaming* vivem, em grande parte, de *reboots*, prequelas, sequelas e adaptações *live-action* de fantasia, não podemos esquecer um outro pilar essencial da ficção fantástica: a animação. Este artigo começa com um breve comentário sobre produções de animação de fantasia para *streaming* e centra-se depois na análise de uma das obras mais recentes do catálogo da Netflix: *Nimona* (2023), uma adaptação de Troy Quane e Nick Bruno da novela gráfica do mesmo nome da autoria de ND Stevenson. Este artigo pretende analisar a relação entre o original e a adaptação, dando especial atenção às figuras monstruosas que estes apresentam, destacando a forma como certas personagens são representadas de maneira a subverter motivos centrais da ficção fantástica, como monstros, vilões, heróis e a relação entre o bem e o mal. O principal objetivo será verificar como as empresas de *streaming* estão a influenciar o desenvolvimento destas obras e como estas, por sua vez, estão a contribuir para o desenvolvimento da ficção fantástica.

**Palavras-Chave** | Animação Fantástica; Adaptação; *Streaming*; Figuras Monstruosas; *Nimona*



### **Streaming Fantasy Animation**

In a time when streaming platforms thrive on fantasy productions, namely prequels and sequels of previously well-established works, and especially accounting for the recent trend of live-action remakes, let us not leave the contribution of animation unsung.<sup>1</sup> In 2018, Wendy Lee pointed out the great importance of animation within streaming companies, noting that “Netflix and Amazon spark animation revival, spending heavily in quest for binge-worthy shows” (n.pg.). Regarding Netflix’s case specifically, Vice President of Kids and Family content Melissa Cobb states that “animation is a really core area”, which viewers all over the world seem to love (quoted in Lee n.pg.). Lee goes on to highlight some reasons why executives feel animation is so popular in this context, speaking not only of the ease of access of streaming in general, but also of the possibility

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this study, fantasy will be taken as a genre and animation as a medium. For a deeper discussion on the complex relationship between the two, as well as their respective definitions, see, for instance, Holliday and Sergeant.

to cater to audiences around the globe since these works “can be easily dubbed in different languages” (n.pg.).

Despite focusing here on animation directed at children<sup>2</sup>, Netflix has also found great success in fantasy animation for adults, with titles such as *Castlevania* (2017-2021) *Love, Death + Robots* (2019-), *Arcane* (2021-), and others. Thinking of the advantages associated with animation, taking the case of *Castlevania*, for instance, Larry Tanz claims “it was a great opportunity to try some kind of new animation with a very unique look and style” (Lee n.pg.). In the same way, Melissa Wolfe argues that “animation is a way that you can kind of highlight some fantastical elements and build really magical worlds and experiences that you might not be able to do in the live-action space” (quoted in Lee n.pg.).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Lee calls attention to the fact that streaming platforms are a suitable alternative for the development of animated works that would not be easily placed on traditional network TV. An example of this is Netflix’s new animated fantasy movie that had a hard time seeing the light of day, *Nimona* (2023).

As this particular work has been advertised as an adaptation of ND Stevenson’s graphic novel of the same name, I intend to discuss it in the context of adaptation. This concept, however, is not without its issues, so I will be referring to Linda Hutcheon’s definition of adaptation as “deliberate, announced, and extended revisitations of prior works” (xvi). Thinking of the problems that often occur when adaptations openly announce themselves as such (Hutcheon 3), namely the fact that identifying one work as the “original” and another as the “adaptation” usually results in the denigration of the latter (implying it is unoriginal or less than), Hutcheon suggests that a fairer alternative is to see it as “a derivation that is not derivative – a work that is second without being secondary” (9). As such, Hutcheon proposes three ways to look at adaptation: a transposition of a recognizable work (involving a shift in medium, genre, point of view, etc.); an act of (re)interpretation and (re-)creation; or a form of intertextuality (8).

In this sense, we can think of Netflix’s *Nimona* as an adaptation that constitutes a transposition of medium, from graphic novel to animated movie, in which an act of recreation and reinterpretation can also be observed. Moreover, and especially in the

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<sup>2</sup> There is a tendency to associate both animation and fantasy with children, an issue that has been explored at length. Here, however, I am not particularly interested in addressing the matter of intended audience but rather on the message the works themselves relay.

<sup>3</sup> There is indeed an argument to be made in favor of animation as an ideal medium to tell fantastic stories, this being a topic that has been brought up in various forums and social networks and has propelled the creation of concept fanart on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram.

context of streaming, adaptations can also be considered in terms of audiences. As pointed out by Hutcheon, “different adaptations solicit different audiences or fan communities”, (122) a fact that is acknowledged and seen as advantageous by Netflix executive Melissa Cobb, as “some animators have large fan bases on social media, providing them with ready-made audiences” (quoted in Lee n.p.). In this particular case, ND Stevenson already had a solid and established fanbase, not only as author of the novel, but also as animator and producer of other acclaimed adaptations, namely the 2018 *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* reboot, also distributed by Netflix.

Taking this into consideration, I want to look at how the movie *Nimona* adapts, revises, expands, and interacts with the original it stems from, focusing on representations of monstrous figures and embodiments of evil. The main goal will be to highlight innovative impulses of storytelling within fantasy fiction, and determine how streaming is contributing to their development, specifically through adaptation.

### **“I am a lot of things”: Adapting *Nimona***

Considering what has been said, I want to focus primarily on the analysis of the movie, but also look at its relationship with the graphic novel that inspired it. “*Nimona* was originally a webcomic written and drawn by ND Stevenson, with the first pages posted on Tumblr on December 14, 2011, and then it officially ran as a webcomic on its own site from June 19, 2012 to September 30, 2014” (“*Nimona* (Webcomic)”). It was then picked up by HarperCollins, who published it as a graphic novel in 2015:

Nimona is an impulsive young shapeshifter with a knack for villainy. Lord Ballister Blackheart is a villain with a vendetta. As sidekick and supervillain, Nimona and Lord Blackheart are about to wreak some serious havoc. Their mission: prove to the kingdom that Sir Ambrosius Goldenloin and his buddies at the Institution of Law Enforcement and Heroics aren't the heroes everyone thinks they are. Nemeses! Dragons! Science! Symbolism! All these and more await in this brilliantly subversive, sharply irreverent epic from N.D. Stevenson. Based on his award-winning web comic.

Reads the back cover blurb of the second edition, dedicated to “all the monster girls”, and “now a Netflix animated film!”. Meanwhile, *Nimona*, the animated adaptation directed by Nick Bruno and Troy Quane, is advertised as “a NEW HERO TAKES SHAPE. A knight framed for a tragic crime teams with a scrappy, shape-shifting teen to prove his innocence” (“*Nimona* (2023)”). The movie was originally meant to be animated

by Blue Sky Studios, who had been working on the project since 2015, “but that production was officially cancelled in February 2021. On April 11, 2022, it was announced that the movie was picked up again, Annapurna Animation would produce the movie, DNEG would animate it, and Netflix would distribute it” (“*Nimona* (Movie)”). *Nimona* was officially released on Netflix on June 30, 2023.

Had it not been for the alliance between Annapurna and Netflix, *Nimona* the movie might have never reached the public, all due to another industry titan, The Walt Disney Company. Fox Animation was the first to acquire the rights for the movie, which was set to be produced by Fox-owned Blue Sky Studios, but in 2019, Disney took over Blue Sky when it acquired 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox. In 2021, with the film 75 percent completed, Disney shut down Blue Sky, canceling *Nimona* in the process. Though Disney claimed this was because of ongoing issues with the pandemic, a number of Blue Sky employees claimed that Disney had issues with its queer themes, which are rarely seen in mainstream Western animation, including a same-sex kiss (Levitt n.pg.). However, this is the very reason why “part of *Nimona*’s popularity and success absolutely stems from its stark contrast to Disney’s offerings” (n.pg.), argues Sean Shuman in his article, “Netflix’s *Nimona*: Why This Animated Film Is Better Off Without Disney”.

In this sense, and in line with many other reviews, Shuman goes on to praise the movie for its bold experimentation, incredible animation style, interesting subtext, and unique concepts (like the melding of science-fiction elements with medieval set dressing). Placing it more in line with acclaimed animation hit *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), and away from other Disney works such as *Elemental* (2023): “*Nimona* is easily one of Netflix’s better offerings in recent years, standing alongside other projects like *Arcane* in bringing brilliant animated stories to the small screen – and away from Disney” (Shuman n.pg.). The movie was extremely well received and achieved great success in “pleasing new viewers and fans of the graphic novels alike” (Pitman n.pg.), which may have something to do with the fact that, during the production of the movie, producer Karen Ryan urged the studio workers involved in the project to share what the novel meant to them. As a result of this discussion, directors Bruno and Quane realized that the story was seen as “a love letter to all those who are misunderstood” (Brown n.pg.), with many people, particularly of the LGBTQ+ community, connecting to and feeling very passionately about this theme (Brown n.pg.). This realization left the directors with a need to “embrace the *Nimona*-ness of the film” (Bruno in Brown n.pg.), and a big part of this exercise of staying true to *Nimona*’s essence laid in understanding its creator.



Nate Diana Stevenson has become distinguished as the “award-winning, bestselling author and illustrator of *Nimona* and *The Fire Never Goes Out*, the cocreator of *Lumberjanes*, and (...) showrunner for the award-winning Netflix series *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*” (“ND Stevenson” n.pg.), but Stevenson’s relationship with the work is very personal and his influence over the movie goes beyond name recognition.<sup>4</sup> The first edition of the *Nimona* graphic novel was published under the authorship of Noelle Stevenson. Since then, the author has come out as non-binary and transmasculine and has legally changed his name. In his page “I’m Fine I’m Fine Just Understand”, the author has released numerous webcomics that range from coming to terms with his identity to the development of works such as *Nimona*. Likewise, Stevenson has spoken about how his queer identity and his life experience have slipped into his work, and particularly how *Nimona* factored into all of it:

I was very drawn toward gay characters and gay relationships [at the time]. I think I knew that there was a part of me that I hadn’t yet tapped into—that making comics was my way of sort of living vicariously through these characters. The trans stuff, I don’t think that I understood that yet... Looking back and reading it and seeing it all over the place... I’m like, “Oh, my God.” I just wanna grab my tiny baby head and shake it a little bit. But also, I had to go on the journey that I did. And the comic was part of that. (quoted in Levitt n.pg.)

In the words of Barry Levitt, who conducted this interview with Stevenson, “the queerness in *Nimona* runs deeper than its spunky central character—it explores the idea of chosen family, same-sex romance, and how powerful institutions perceive queerness as ‘other,’ and therefore a threat to normalcy” (n.pg.). In this sense, the changes that readers of the novel will find in the adaptation have to do mainly with the ways in which these core themes have been transposed. That being said, more than the queerness that is transversal to all of Stevenson’s projects, I want to focus on *Nimona*’s particular representations and uses of monstrosity.

### **“We are villains. Embrace it”. Redefining Monstrous Figures**

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<sup>4</sup> “I had various levels of involvement with the movie at different times. Sometimes I was pretty hands-off. Sometimes I was pretty involved in the daily cycle of things. But I think overall, I was pretty open to having changes made. I told the story I set out to tell—the movie is going to be its own thing. But I still have insights into the characters and into the world and why certain choices are being made so that even if the choice was different in the movie, at least it would come from that same kernel of truth” (Stevenson quoted in Levitt n.pg.).

As with any traditional fantasy quest story, *Nimona* is ripe with monsters, heroes, and villains, though they might not be the expected ones: “Although its storyline appears to rely on a classic narrative frame of good versus evil, it complicates binaries and successfully interrogates the bases for common societal definitions of good and evil, classifications, and taboos” (Precup 1). Thus, one of the main differences between graphic novel and movie lies precisely in the characters that embody these traditional tropes. Though both works use them in the same way, with the same subversive purpose, they differ mostly in terms of plot and representation.

Plotwise, in the movie *Nimona* gets a definitive backstory that she does not have in the novel,<sup>5</sup> which greatly influences the story and serves to highlight the intricate connection between the definitions of heroes and monsters. Likewise, instead of being introduced to Ballister Blackheart as the villain (and getting the chance to see him in a different light as the novel progresses), in the movie we accompany Ballister Boldheart’s villainification at the hands of the Institution of Law Enforcement and Heroics, which remains the main evil force, but on a much more personal and intentional level. While in the novel Ballister accepts Nimona’s offer to help him unmask the Institution and reveal its evil nature, in the movie, the duo wants to prove their own innocence and in doing so end up exposing the Institution as the “bad guys”, something not even they realize at first. As for the characters, while Nimona is the one who stays truer to her novel counterpart<sup>6</sup>, Ambrosius Goldenloin undergoes a drastic makeover, as does his relationship with Ballister, which will result in a deviation from Stevenson’s initial intentions for the characters, but that will nevertheless serve to explore other relevant themes.

Some of these alterations in dynamics are made immediately apparent in the covers of the works. In the graphic novel “both male characters, as well as Nimona, are featured on the cover, suggesting to readers their respective moral alignment before the reader enters the narrative world (with Nimona situated centrally between them)” (Donahue 456). One of the movie posters, on the other hand, has Nimona standing on Ballister’s shoulders, countless weapons pointed at them; Nimona slyly smiling, ready to

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<sup>5</sup> In the graphic novel, all the information we have about Nimona’s past comes from a flashback, where “it is implied that Nimona was separated from her family and experimented on by a group of scientists who claimed that they could help her ‘get better,’ leading her to become suspicious of anyone who not only shows interest in her shapeshifting but who displays any sort of sympathy for her as well” (Stevenson quoted in Barbour 12).

<sup>6</sup> It is important to highlight that though the characters and the story have been through multiple iterations since the first webcomic, Nimona always remains the glue that brings it all together, and her essence is always at the core of the narrative.

face the challenge, Ballister, insecure, unsure on how to proceed, as the villain's life is new to him. The caption reads "a little anti, a little hero", which already hints at a kind of subversion of expectations in what comes to heroism. Another movie poster released by Netflix features only Nimona with a caption that reads "a new hero takes shape", hinting at her heroic and main role in the story, at her shapeshifting powers, and also at the new order she comes to suggest at the expense of the old one she comes to destroy.

But before looking at these representations more closely, it is important to know what exactly we are referring to when we speak of monsters. In 1996, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen paved the way for the development of monster studies with *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, introducing the notion that "the monster is difference made flesh" (7). Meanwhile, in *Monster Culture in the 21st Century*, Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui revisit the foundations laid by Choen noting that monsters "offer a space where society can safely represent and address anxieties of its time" (1), thus arguing that "monstrosity has transcended its status as a metaphor and has indeed become a necessary condition of our existence in the twenty-first century" (1). In this sense, the authors claim that monsters are now used to manage "profound shifts in 'post-racial' and 'post-gender' identifications, and the increasing ambiguity and queering of sexual desires" (Levina and Bui 2).

On a similar note, Andrew Ng agrees that monsters "are often metaphors for 'unpleasant social and existential realities' that contemporary society seeks to deny and expurgate" (1), claiming that narratives that feature monsters have the power to provide powerful social commentary about culture and ideology (1). Likewise, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock adds to this discussion with the following claim:

[T]hat monsters invariably upset and therefore call into question the boundaries of existing conceptual categories tells us something else essential about them: that what is or is not considered monstrous depends on and is defined against prevailing conceptions of the human and of normalcy. (...) That our monsters keep changing—or that the same monsters look, act, and function differently in different historical contexts—demonstrates the extent to which our understanding of them is always dependent upon time, place, and worldview". (3-4)

A statement that reinforces the basic notion that "monsters always provoke a direct confrontation with the status quo" (Compagna and Steinhart x).

Closely associated with the concept of monster, we also have the notion of villain that, much like monsters, “stand out as the socially harmful ‘Other’, which needs to be contained and overcome for the sake of normality and life. Villainy, it seems, is a matter of perspective, a matter of ‘us’ versus ‘them’, ‘normal’ versus ‘other’, and ‘life’ versus ‘death’” (Genc and Lenhardt ix). Moreover, on the fantasy sphere, and more specifically “in modern genre fantasy, monsters are a writer’s convenience for placing yet another obstacle in the way of the hero’s quest” (Clute and Grant 654). In this sense, I will now look at how *Nimona* applies and defies these notions of villain, monster, and Other.

As has been pointed out regarding the novel, “the familiar commitments, relations, and actions associated with the fantasy hero form are, in Stevenson’s queer take on the genre, turned against themselves” (Barbour 1). In this way, the readings I will propose are not entirely new, as *Nimona* has been studied in this light before, looking at representations of otherness and queerness in the context of graphic novels and comics, using the original as a case study.<sup>7</sup> However, I want to show how the adaptation takes the same themes to give them new life and visibility by conveying them in a different way and presenting them to a new public.

James J. Donahue, for instance, provides an insightful analysis of the comic, equating the tropes of the novel to those of fairy tales<sup>8</sup>, highlighting that all the traditional figures are present in this story, which demands the identification of good and evil parties, that at first glance may be: Ballister – the villain, Goldenloin – the hero, and Nimona – the monster, fulfilling “stock expectations of a traditional fairy tale”. However, as Donahue points out, “Stevenson provides these telltale markers for the reader, in part, to later challenge them, unsettling the reader’s expectations while simultaneously demonstrating the fluidity of individual identification” (456). Meanwhile, in the movie the characters in question are represented in ways and placed in positions that make them more complex and ambiguous, making it harder to place them in such simplistic categories, even at first glance, emphasizing the very point Stevenson was trying to make in the novel, that is, that not everything is what it seems.

As I have said before, Nimona is a character that has remained essentially the same since its first appearance in the webcomic, with one of the few changes the movie

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<sup>7</sup> See: Barbour, Donahue, and Precup.

<sup>8</sup> The fairy-tale structure is also incorporated in the movie, which begins with the narration of a tale about a kingdom which “a long, long time ago” lived in peace, until it was attacked by a great and terrible evil and saved by a mighty hero (*Nimona* 00:23).

incorporates having to do with her backstory. Though, much like the novel, the movie does not dwell on where Nimona's powers come from (as a way to show how they are simply a part of her, with no need for further justification), by having her first traumatic encounter with society (being deemed a monster and consequently ostracized) stem from her relationship with Goldenloin's direct ancestor, beloved hero Gloreth, the movie further intertwines her with the tradition of heroism she finds herself quite literally trapped in. Despite being seen as a monster and placing herself as the sidekick, the story is hers, she is the protagonist, and she ends up being the true hero of the narrative.

Indeed, she can be defined as a traditional monster, since she disrupts the established order and brings its very essence into question, in typical shapeshifter fashion, by shattering conventions and not conforming to any simple, straightforward definition. However, the fact that she initially places herself as a secondary character in her own story is more revealing of her need to fit in, her search for an identity, for a place to belong, and all the difficulties that come with it, especially when you are different. In the movie, we meet Nimona at the precise moment she is being confronted with the information (divulged by the Institution) that Ballister is a villain, which reveals an opportunity, a possibility of comradeship. She finds in him a category she can fit into: as a sidekick to the villain. She believes she is not meant to be the hero; she knows society sees her as an evil monster, and if the heroes do not accept her, maybe the villains can. Of course, matters get more complicated as Ballister is not, in fact, the villain and is determined to clear his name and fulfil the role of hero he has always aspired to. While at first Ballister is led to believe that he can only become a hero by slaying the monster, he ends up achieving heroism by showing Nimona kindness and acceptance.

Moreover, Nimona's monstrosity is attributed to her due to her shapeshifting nature and as put by Donahue:

[H]er gender presentation—masculine, feminine, or nonbinary—is a conscious part of her shapeshifting choices and, as such, is a foundational part of her identity. And just as Blackheart accepts her in all her various forms, those who would do her harm are those who would affix to her a single identity. (466)

The same applies in the movie and is beautifully put in this short piece of dialogue between Ballister and Nimona when they are agreeing to team up, and Nimona shifts into a shark:

Ballister: "Can't you just be you? Please"

Nimona: "I don't follow"

Ballister: "Girl you."

Nimona: "But I'm not a girl, I'm a shark!" (Nimona 24:20)<sup>9</sup>

This exchange reveals much about the two characters, namely Nimona's unwavering attitude of staying true to herself and Ballister's initial incomprehension towards it, which will eventually evolve into acceptance. Nevertheless,

Stevenson describes Nimona as a character who can't be understood. She exists as some form of personified rebellion designed to question the prejudices of those who dare label her as not being feminine enough or expressing nebulous chaos in ways that inconvenience the status quo. "It's the pressure to fit in or take on a form that people understand the easiest and will let you move through the world more easily," he says. "But that's not actually easier if you are the kind of person who needs to express yourself in this way". (King n.pg.)

The previous interaction thus presents Ballister as someone who, despite also being misidentified by the Institution, cannot at first bring himself to understand Nimona, even if he does not actively harm her in other ways. Ballister's character is made much more intriguing in the movie because we get to know him, see his heroic potential, and see him being framed; while there is no space for the audience to question him and his character because of it, the movie goes deeper into how he deals with being marginalized after having found a way in. By animating him as a dark-skinned man and reinforcing the notion that he would be the first outsider to become a knight, the movie raises questions of ethnicity associated with villainy that the graphic novel does not go into. Moreover, and similarly to the novel, Ballister is disabled due to the loss of his arm (and again, in the movie, we accompany him as he learns how to adapt to his new reality). In this sense, by having a disabled person be deemed a villain, there is a clear commentary on how disabled people are also typically marginalized. Like in the graphic novel, and as Barbour noted,

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<sup>9</sup> Besides the famous shark shape she assumes in this scene, it is very meaningful that the shape she takes during the final battle is that of a dragon. This can symbolize many things, but I would like to highlight that "the commonest monsters are dragons" (Clute and Grant 654), and that while "in most Mediterranean and European mythologies, serpents are associated with evil, and dragons a sort of super-serpent, are more evil still (...), the dragons of Chinese mythology, by contrast, are usually benevolent" (Clute and Grant 295). This makes it even more pivotal that for her swan song, she embodies a creature that, despite being known to and seen by some as deeply evil, can be the very opposite. Moreover, traditionally, "dragons are the hunter, not the hunted. (...) They are liminal beings often connected with the getting of wisdom rather than merely enemies to be confronted" (Clute and Grant 295). Making it even more telling that she becomes a dragon because she is being hunted and threatened, and it is because of her sacrifice while in this shape that the truth about who is and who is not a hero is revealed.

Precup (2017) references the historical understanding of disability as a “visible translation upon the body of inner moral depravity”. Fennell similarly locates the contemporary “Western popular [cultural]... expectation that evil people should “look evil”” leading to the common motif of the “deformed” supervillain. In this problematic formulation, disability is treated as a “preemptive, almost karmic punishment” that would have taken its toll on Blackheart. (12)

Likewise, another way of incorporating monstrous features into the narrative to question them is through the romantic relationship between Ballister and Ambrosius. While in the novel it can be understood that the two share a prior, intricate relationship, Stevenson notes that while “Ballister and Ambrosius are, canonically, former secret(-ish) boyfriends”, he admits that “it wasn’t my intention from the beginning. It’s one of the things I’d change if I could do it all again – I’d make it clear, in the text, from the start” (Stevenson quoted in Donahue 460), which the movie is able to do by exploring and developing this in more depth. In this sense, while in the comic “Blackheart and Sir Goldenloin end the narrative in each other’s arms, suggesting that they will be able to embrace their feelings for each other publicly” (Donahue 460), the movie goes a bit further by making the relationship clearer and more visible from the beginning and ending with the two characters sharing a kiss in public, bringing what in the novel is only a possibility into actuality on screen.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, Ambrosius is “a character who was adapted as East Asian for the film, but who Stevenson says was intentionally written in his comic as the embodiment of white privilege” (White n.pg.). This alteration shifts this character’s function in the narrative from a satirical take on the traditional hero to a commentary that, while still calling attention to the fact that not all heroes are worthy of that title, explores the matter of those who, while not apparently other, only manage to fit in by keeping a side of themselves hidden. In the novel “it’s convenient to cast him in the role of the hero because he’s a white man with blond hair and classic good looks, and has “everything we need for us to make this pitch – to sell this propaganda – of who the good guy is and who the bad guy is” (Stevenson quoted in White n.pg.). This notion is achieved in the movie by having him, while not being a completely undeserving white man, be a direct descendant of the

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<sup>10</sup> Goldenloin is also portrayed in the movie as being more afraid of society’s judgment of their relationship, rather than of his own feelings for Ballister, something he seems to struggle with more in the graphic novel, providing two different experiences when it comes to dealing with the societal pressures of being in a same sex relationship.



greatest hero of the kingdom, which also reinforces the matter of him being a victim of the Institution's enforcement of heroic stereotypes.

As such, in the movie, Ambrosius' own villainy comes from the fact that he is "a deeply flawed person who is clinging to his version of the world that he wants to be true, shutting everything out to the point of behaving villainously, whether he thinks that or not" (Stevenson quoted in White n.pg.), particularly in how he addresses and treats Nimona. Nevertheless, he is still portrayed as one of the good guys, and someone who ultimately upholds goodness, so,

the directors' adaptation of the knight results in the creation of a separate character, Sir Thoddeus Sureblade (Beck Bennett), who embodies the knight's less desirable traits. Goldenloin then got a more complex narrative that still spoke to an underlying question Stevenson had while writing. That is, whether or not to lean on "something that makes things simpler" because it tells you what is right and wrong" (White n.pg.).

The role of dictating what is what falls to the Institution, which in doing so represents the true evil in both works. In the graphic novel, the Institution hurts people in general, with Ballister's becoming a scapegoat for their mistakes being a lucky coincidence. Yet, in the movie, they have a personal vendetta against Ballister and Nimona because of the differences they represent. The personified villain that embodies this is the Director who frames Ballister because she fears the potential social revolution that having him be a hero might cause. Likewise, she wants Nimona destroyed because she is the monster people have been taught to fear. They are, much like villain and monster, a threat to the norm. But much like the purest representation of evil, the Institution is,

one of the comic and film's main villains, someone who both characters and viewers might look at and instantly trust. Instead, they represent "mundane evil that we run into the most often in the world," Stevenson says. It's the people who feel "the ends justify the means" in the name of perceived safety, and who don't think too far beyond "this is my job and this is what I will do because this is how things are done". (White n.pg.)

Thus, and following Barbour's interpretation, which also applies to the movie, Nimona teaches Ballister and Ambrosius to stay true to themselves outside of any pre-established, pre-attributed roles that may have been imposed on them: "Through her, the hero narrative is so thoroughly disoriented and defamiliarized that it becomes a bizarre

and uninhabitable place for all of its stock characters” (Barbour 1). Ballister and Ambrosius end up coming into their supposed heroic roles by rejecting the rules of the Institution that would make them heroes, and by accepting Nimona, the embodiment of difference, who was deemed the enemy, the monster to be slain. Likewise, Nimona herself goes from monster to hero, not only by taking the role of the protagonist but by staying true to herself and proving those who would misjudge her wrong. She might not have found a place to belong, but she has been shown that it is possible because if those who set out to destroy her can show her love and acceptance, then anyone can.

### **Final Remarks**

*Nimona* brings promising possibilities when it comes to fantasy animation and reveals the potential of streaming’s contribution to the production and dissemination of innovative stories that break with previous traditions, reinventing them anew. The movie’s own turbulent journey reveals a lot about the current panorama of studios and streaming and the ways in which they are controlling the diffusion of animated fantasy works. It taps into issues of ownership by revealing how big corporations like Disney have the power to scratch projects that do not abide by their ideals, leading to a reduction in the diversity of available productions. But it also comes to hint at a more positive outlook by revealing how big streaming platforms such as Netflix, despite all the potentially negative impacts they might be having on the industry, also have the power to rescue and give life to different, worthy projects, contributing to the development of a more varied assortment of works.

Works that, through alternative representations of monstrosity, for instance, offer a fresh, more complex version of notions of good and evil that can sometimes be very simplistic in fantasy and children’s fiction. In fact, that they are fantastic and directed at young viewers only makes it that more relevant that they question a basic dualism of good and evil and introduce matters of ambiguity and moral complexity. If Stevenson’s intention with the graphic novel was to explore how different identities rupture the fabric of society and become othered and marginalized simply by being, who better to do it than a shapeshifting monster and a disgraced disabled hero of color turned villain, pitted against his hero ex-boyfriend who betrayed him on behalf of the Institution that upholds these harmful notions?

Likewise, Bruno and Quane’s rendition of the story proves that adaptations have the great potential of expanding, reviving, and spreading these stories. The fact that the

movie relies on the same basic themes and trends of the original only goes to show how the act of adaptation allows them to be kept and further explored, not only enhancing the core message, but also helping to broadcast it in other mediums and in doing so, bringing it to new audiences. Nimona's perseverance (adaptation and character alike) reveals the importance of this type of character, this type of representation, this type of narrative. By using monstrous figures to voice marginalized identities, that are yes different, yes other, but not inherently evil because of it, *Nimona* reveals that the real monsters are those who would tell you otherwise.

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Photo: Elisa Azevedo

## **The Adaptation of Ridley Scott's Sci-Fi Series *Raised by Wolves*: From Video Streaming to Comic Book**

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**Abstract** | This article aims to discuss how Aaron Guzikowski's digital comic book *Raised by Wolves # 1: Hark, the Herald Angel Sings* (2020) visually constructs a transmedia storytelling process related to the HBO Max streaming series *Raised by Wolves* (2020-2022). The analysis, thus, centers on how the tie-in eBook operates diegetic and psychological transformations on the preexisting material of the American science fiction and fantasy show produced and partially directed by Ridley Scott. The discussion demonstrates that, rather than reworking the script of the audiovisual production, the digital comic book invents new characters and situations to expand the diegetic universe to include backstories, and it also consolidates psychological transformations in the narrative to provide readers and viewers with new insights into the characters' thought processes. The study provides some grounds to support the contention that science fiction and fantasy are particularly well-suited for novelization, given the unique characteristics

of the genres – such as cognitive estrangement and worldbuilding – and the profound engagement of their readership and fandom with diegetic content.

**Keywords** | Adaptation Studies; Streaming Platforms; Novelization; *Raised by Wolves*; Ridley Scott



**Resumo** | Este artigo tem como objetivo discutir como a revista em quadrinhos digital *Raised by Wolves # 1: Hark, the Herald Angel Sings* (2020), de Aaron Guzikowski, constrói visualmente uma narrativa transmediática em conexão com a série *Raised by Wolves* (2020-2022), veiculada pela plataforma de *streaming* de vídeo HBO Max. A investigação analisa como a história em quadrinhos, adaptada da série de fantasia e de ficção científica, realiza transformações diegéticas e psicológicas (Baetens, 2018) do conteúdo preexistente do programa americano, que foi produzido e parcialmente realizado por Ridley Scott. A discussão mostra que, em vez de repetir o roteiro da produção audiovisual, a revista em quadrinhos digital inventa novas personagens e situações com o fito de expandir o universo diegético e incluir histórias de fundo, além de consolidar transformações psicológicas na narrativa com a finalidade de oferecer aos espectadores um detalhamento dos estados emocionais dos seres ficcionais. O estudo indica que a ficção científica e a fantasia são particularmente adequadas para a novelização, dadas as características particulares do gênero – como o estranhamento cognitivo e a geoficção – e o envolvimento íntimo dos seus leitores e fãs com o conteúdo diegético.

**Palavras-Chave** | Estudos de Adaptação; Plataformas de *streaming*; Novelização; *Raised by Wolves*; Ridley Scott



## Introduction

Adaptation, along with other forms of extension and transmediation, has played a significant role in shaping literature, theater, art, and popular culture. It has affected the construction and reception of specific works and contributed to the evolution of storytelling in various forms, such as prose, poetry, theater, painting, and visual culture (Szwedky and Jellenik 2). More specifically, adaptation has long been a significant component of science fiction and fantasy productions across different media. Whether due to the social and public dimensions of cinema or the competition between niche cable channels and established networks for viewers and commercial revenues, science fiction and fantasy have proven to be immensely popular genres for reincarnation and adaptation

(Geraghty 82, 109). Since the first moving pictures – such as *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), directed by Georges Méliès, or the first film version of *Frankenstein* (1910), produced by Edison Studios and directed by J. Searle Dawley – it seems evident that adaptation in its multifaceted materializations is one of the intrinsic parts of fantasy and “sci-fi” universes (for an extended argument on this topic and more examples, see McSweeney and Joy i; Kapell and Pilkington 1-3). Since science fiction and fantasy films have become the most profitable category of cinematic production in recent decades, new processes of transformation, translation, adaptation, or even mutation seem to be constantly emerging to engender more fantastic audiovisual content that started as novels, short stories, plays, among others (Kapell and Pilkington 1-2). This causes the concept of these popular genres and their creative transfers between different subgenres and media to be permanently evolving in technical and artistic aspects.

Film adaptation tends to be particularly important for science fiction and fantasy genres because it allows wider audiences to have contact with radical ideas and thought-provoking stories, stimulating imagination and debate on relevant topics such as technology and politics. The adaptation of sci-fi and fantasy products into commercially successful “epic” films or series tends to initiate such a mass appeal that these literary fantasies – frequently considered “niche” subgenres in literature – would not have done otherwise. In other words, the widespread recognition of specific literary science fiction and fantasy pieces might be largely attributed to various forms of adaptation. By the same reasoning, adaptations of stories into films and graphic novels, among others, tend to potentially inspire new creative forms and innovations in different media (Geczy and McBurnie 14-17). Whenever they are translated into audiovisual performative modes or even when they are novelized into more traditional prose forms, these stories and ideas consolidated into adaptations can increase the impact and popularity of the genres, as well as inspire other retellings, recreations, universe expansions, theme parks, and so forth. Conventional film adaptations, for instance, often tend to encourage audiences to read the source material. When connected to graphic novels, film adaptations can help expand the fan base and increase the genre’s visibility.

Before proceeding, however, it is essential to provide a brief overview of the specificities concerning the fan base of these genres. Several prominent science fiction and fantasy narratives are often considered to promote profound parasocial relationships between audiences and imaginary characters, often blurring the lines between fictional universes and reality. This might distinguish sci-fi fans from the audiences who engage



with other genres. Thus, fandoms of science fiction and fantasy tend to participate actively in acts of appropriation, adaptation, and rewriting of their preferred franchises by engaging in the creative production of memes, role-playing games, “cosplay”, fan fashion, “geek” products and beauty lines, promotional events, among many others (Boumaroun 6-29, 106).

Given the current context of technological advancements, media convergence, and the pervasiveness of audiovisual culture, audiences have come to *expect* transmedia franchises, wherein narratives are disseminated across various media, thereby creating complex story worlds. For this and other reasons, universe expansions of the source material through multifaceted media adaptations might continue to engage fans, given their propensity for affective attachment and immersion within their preferred fictional worlds. These universe expansions can also motivate viewers and readers to engage in new adaptive productions that include but are not limited to fanfics, animations, and fan-made videos, among other media-related phenomena. These inventive adaptive contributions, which may be considered manifestations of collaboration or even co-authorship, represent another important characteristic that differentiates science fiction and fantasy enthusiasts from readers and viewers of other conventional genres.

By way of illustration of these universe expansion strategies through adaptation, it is worth mentioning a comic book, released by DC Comics in 2020 and titled *Raised by Wolves #1: Hark, the Herald Angel Sings*, which purports to provide audiences with more detail about the show *Raised by Wolves* (2020-2022), created by Aaron Guzikowski<sup>1</sup>, developed by Ridley Scott and streamed in HBO. Although more needs to be said about this, the recent dramatic series follows the struggles of a pair of futuristic androids to raise human children on an inhospitable planet called Kepler 22-b. Although it was not a fan-made comic book, it was used by the showrunners as a prequel to respond to indeterminacies that viewers identified in the screen-based episodes. It also functions to extend the fictional universe of the series into other media, acknowledging that, following the viewing of a film or an episode, science fiction and fantasy audiences consistently desire additional content.

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron Guzikowski (1974-) is an American television series creator and feature film writer. He wrote screenplays to films such as Baltasar Kormákur’s *Contraband* (2012), and Denis Villeneuve’s *Prisoners* (2013). He also adapted the screenplay to Michael Noer’s remake of *Papillon* (2017). Guzikowski also created original television series such as *The Red Road* (2014-2015) and *Raised by Wolves* (2020-2022). He recently published a novella titled *Personhood* about a grieving woman who attempts to cope with the death of her daughter by using advanced augmented reality technology to create a non-corporeal AI partial replica of her deceased child (Guzikowski, “Personhood” 23).

The limits of adaptations have extended enormously with the emergence of online streaming services. Video streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, HBO Max, and Hulu, among others, contribute to the popularization of science fiction and fantasy for several reasons. Firstly, these online applications provide convenient, global access to a considerable catalog of science fiction and fantasy content. Secondly, these streaming platforms invest in both original and adapted productions, intensifying the availability of content in these genres. Furthermore, online services can stream personalized content, thus amplifying the diversity of their viewers. Finally, the availability and the on-demand nature of such online streaming platforms allow audiences to consume science fiction and fantasy (as well as other styles) at their own convenient pace and schedule. This may encourage more viewers to experiment and engage with these genres and many others. This ever-increasing demand for streaming platforms to generate and provide an unprecedented volume of content has resulted in a heightened focus on adaptations, particularly within the science fiction and fantasy genres.

### **Objectives and Methodology**

Extensive scholarship exists on science fiction and fantasy films and series that originated from novels, short stories, or plays. However, the processes of transformation, translation, adaptation, or even mutation involved in novels, short stories, and comic books that *originated from* movies or series remain insufficiently examined. Given these considerations and others, the focus of this article will be the categories of transformation in terms of the adaptation from the screen (the HBO Max show *Raised by Wolves*) to the page (the digital comic book tie-in *Raised by Wolves # 1: Hark, the Herald Angel Sings*) as a multiple-platform strategy. The main objective is to investigate the diegetic and psychological transformations made by the writers and showrunners when they transposed *Raised by Wolves* from television to visual novelization.

The analysis conducted here focuses on the intricacies concerning a media transposition from the performance mode to the print mode. More specifically, the intention is to comprehend the creative strategy adopted by the showrunners to enhance the narrative and the audience engagement by proposing a reading of the published visual novelization based on recent Adaptation Studies. These theories contribute to an understanding of the specificities concerning these textual and audiovisual interflows in our contemporary era of media convergence. Media convergence can be understood as a

historically open-ended migration of different communicative practices across diverse material technologies and social institutions (Jensen 16).

The prequel comic book exemplifies the textual and visual solutions mobilized by the author Aaron Guzikowski to treat the specific characteristics transposed from the adapted series *Raised by Wolves*. Elements such as the development of the visual narrative, the lettering of the dialogue balloons, the characterization, and the symbolisms appear to have been adapted in the comics not only to suggest new aesthetic associations involving the diegetic universe but also to construct a form of transmedia storytelling between both the printed material and the TV show. Other discussion points include technical aspects of the comics, such as the visual or verbal pretexts, the peritextual domains, the backstories, and the world-building parameters.

In terms of method, the analysis of the adaptation produced by Guzikowski, collaborating with Ridley Scott and the HBO Max showrunners, was conducted by identifying patterns of universe expansion and character treatment in conjunction with the series plot associations. The proposed analysis model was based on Adaptation Studies and Narratology (Baetens 74-75; Hühn 129, 259, 177; Ghosal and Gibbons 6-11). Specifically, the visual novelization created by Guzikowski was examined through narratological analyses and interpreted using the transformation categories proposed by Baetens (74-75), namely the diegetic and the psychological transformations.

However, before advancing into the discussion of Scott and Guzikowski's sci-fi digital comic book tie-in *Raised by Wolves #1: Hark, the Herald Angel Sings*, very brief notions on adaptation, novelization, and transmedia storytelling terminologies employed in this study are presented in what follows.

## Conceptual Framework

Adaptations could be characterized as transhistorical, global phenomena that also cross forms, media, and genres (Szwydky and Jellenik 1). Such artistic forms of extension and transmediation have many theoretical implications, and they are frequently difficult to define. A recent study attempts to delimit the contours of an adaptation – whether from the telling mode to the showing mode or any other form – as a type of *dialogic relation*. Despite the diversity of media, the *trait d'union* that links adapted texts (also called *source* or *original*) to their adaptations is to reimagine stories and recognize oneself in them. In the context of adaptation studies, there is an emphasis not only on the *rate of variance* of the derived work but also on its innovative aspects; at the same time, the *process* that

leads from the source to its adaptation, rather than fidelity to the original, is highlighted. From a transmedial perspective, it is, therefore, more pertinent to examine the dialogic relationships between the two works, which are sometimes complicated by the presence of intermediary products (Cangiano and Sambugaro 11).

Although specialists tend to avoid traditional terms such as adaptation and novelization in favor of more recent media-based terminology (Karpinski and Kęłowska-Ławniczak x-xv), these concepts have continued to prove their critical viability. The adaptation of Ridley Scott's *Raised by Wolves* from a screen-based show (i.e., performance mode) to a digital comic book (print mode) mobilizes elements of a visual novelization in the terms proposed by Baetens (1-10, 32). As noted earlier, the term novelization is a form of adaptation that translates or reimagines into *book form* – generally as novels, film photonovels, drawn novels, graphic novels, comic books, film picture books, among others – a preexisting *cinematic* work, original or otherwise.<sup>2</sup> Unlike adaptations from page to screen, novelizations often attempt to interact with a sense of imagetic immersion:

Whether text-based or visual, novelizations are rarely devoid of illustrations and very often lead to a visual apprehension of the adapted work, including while reading [...]. The *impossibility* of completely removing the image – despite the desire of literary adapters to limit its competition with the text – is totally accepted by visual novelization. Unlike the film novel, it engages in retelling through a visual immersion in the filmic diegesis. (Glaude 8)

Novelizations are part of a thriving industry, but they remain under-researched. Even after the first findings of the Belgian professor, a recent publication showed that literary scholars continue to demonstrate a lack of interest in novelization, which might be attributed to a cultural disregard for a genre of novels (photonovels, or comics for the young) that has long been considered as devoid of literary value (Glaude 1). Some of these literary scholars have criticized Baetens's theory because it presupposes that novelizations are attached to physical media. As is the case with adaptations, the novelization process has embraced new technologies, and it can lead to a *media hybridization*, such as in a film picture book or a novel illustrated with photograms or film stills:

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<sup>2</sup> For an extended argument on this topic, see Baetens 1-10.

After devoting a chapter to the place of illustration in the film novel, [Baetens] describes other print-based film adaptations as “visual novelizations” [...]. As the visual double of the literary genre that is at the heart of his essay, *visual novelization* encompasses research topics with greater media hybridity, such as the film photonovel, the drawn novel, *the adaptation into comics form*, or the film picture book. (Glaude 7-8, emphasis added)

All these forms of extension and transmediation have been reshaped in recent years by the advent of the internet, artificial intelligence, and streaming services. The adaptation of Ridley Scott’s series *Raised by Wolves* into comic book form, for instance, elucidates how a video streaming show can be recreated into an illustrated work. This is only one example of a novelization that crosses forms, media, and genres. One might say that this is also a case of transmedia storytelling because different portions of a whole story are communicated through different media (Duncan 337).

As the next section will explore in more depth, the adaptation of Ridley Scott’s *Raised by Wolves* show into a comic visual novelization involves different creative techniques to transpose into the drawn medium significant portions of the audiovisual aspects and nuances of the science fiction and fantasy show.

## Discussion

The basic premise of the show *Raised by Wolves* concerns two futuristic high-tech androids, named Mother (portrayed by the Danish actress Amanda Collin) and Father (played by the British actor Abubakar Salim), who raise human children on a partially inhospitable planet called Kepler-22b after a war devastated the planet Earth. As one of the main driving forces behind most works in the science fiction and fantasy genres, the whole worldbuilding strategy in this show exemplifies the notion of “cognitive estrangement”, a concept that denotes a fictional technique that renders the familiar strange by placing it in an unfamiliar context (Suvin 238). This approach prompts readers or viewers to reassess conventional views through speculative scenarios that reframe real-world issues. The unusual human and android family, the distinctive production designs of the show, and the alien landscape of Kepler-22b not only serve to disorient viewers but also compel them to confront the “*novum*” proposed by this televisual experience.

Whilst the Father android is a generic service model, Mother – also known as Lamia – is an advanced model of assassination machine called a “necromancer” formerly used

to hunt and terminate thousands of people during the war that destroyed the Earth.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, a necromancer is an android weapon that can transmute her skin simulacrum into a high-tech bullet-proof bronze chassis and then fly through war zones in a solemn crucifix pose. Her flight causes more panic than the World War II blitzkrieg because these futuristic necromancer androids have the power to scream devastating sonic blasts that instantly explode human beings into pieces of bloody matter.

Sometime near the end of the war in 2145, an atheistic android engineer named Campion Sturges (portrayed by Cosmo Jarvis) managed to hack into the system of a necromancer – Lamia – to reprogram her to artificially simulate a human mother and to make an interstellar voyage on a probe to Kepler-22b carrying a dozen viable human embryos. She becomes Mother, and her mission is to initiate a new peaceful civilization based on atheistic technocratic values. Although she is partially efficient in guaranteeing the viability and the survival of a few of the embryos in such an unforgiving territory, there seems to remain a certain killer instinct in her.

Father and Mother are programmed to ensure the children's safety on the new planet and to cultivate values of tranquility and harmony by infusing in them a strict version of an atheistic religion, all while overcoming the difficulties of sustaining and building a new community. However, approximately ten years after their landing on Kepler-22b, a mothership called *Heaven* arrives, bringing new humans from the now-destroyed planet Earth. *Heaven* is an ark whose passengers are colonists of the Mithraic religious denomination who worship the god Sol Invictus. Back on Earth, the Mithraics were space crusaders who initiated the final war and utilized the necromancer androids to decimate the atheistic resistance. Now, these two opposing groups – the atheistic androids (who raise human children) and the Mithraic zealots – will inevitably clash in their struggle to survive in the new world. Meanwhile, some of these characters not only discover that the planet hides terrible menaces but also that the god Sol is not simply a devout fairy tale for fanatics. Two seasons containing a total of eighteen episodes of the show were streamed from 2020 to 2022.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For an extended argument on the artificial intelligence exploitation as depicted in this show, see Gefen 203.

<sup>4</sup> In June 2021, the very expensive Ridley Scott-produced space opera *Raised by Wolves* was cancelled after two seasons – together with several other shows – due to the cost-cutting measures adopted by HBO following the Warner Bros and Discovery merger (Kain 1). After the cancellation, which also affected the comic book adaptation after just one issue, HBO Max removed all the episodes from its streaming catalog. This caused fans to initiate a multiple-platform campaign to revive the cancelled science fiction and fantasy series by creating online websites and petitions and by putting up billboards at New York City Times Square requesting that the show be picked up and renewed by another online streamer (Bythrow 2).

As the inaugural season of the series approached its conclusion, a homonymous comic eBook was published. *Raised by Wolves # 1: Hark, the Herald Angel Sings* is a digital comic book tie-in authored by Aaron Guzikowski. It shares the same universe as Ridley Scott's HBO Max series, which is also written by Guzikowski. The comic, downloadable for free on platforms such as Amazon and HBO Max, delves into the early days of life on Kepler-22b. It follows the initial group of children and their android progenitors before the Mithraics' arrival. The narrative uses flashbacks to provide some context to the implementation of the necromancers that caused Earth's downfall and introduces the idea of the necromancers as a disciplinary "boogeyman" to teach the children a lesson.

From the adaptation studies perspective, the comic book announces explicitly its connection to the audiovisual production by incorporating in the peritextual domain of the cover (edited by Liz Erickson and designed by Meghan Hetrick), the televisual logotype stylized exactly as the show's opening title. The streaming service trademark designs and wordmarks are also included in the peritextual zone of the digital comic book. The line "Hark, the Herald Angel Sings" – which comes from a well-known 1739 Christian hymn by Charles Wesley (later reworked by Felix Mendelssohn in 1855) – is the title of the story narrated in this issue of the comic book. The use of the peritextual domains of the digital comic book to link it to an already commercially successful TV show constitutes a typical marketing strategy designed to "boost" its appeal among viewers.

Unlike traditional novelizations that rework a preexisting script and deliver a somehow redundant product, the *Raised by Wolves* comic book does not amount to a show's double. Instead of visually reproducing the plot and the dialogues from the audiovisual series, it was conceived as something separate from it. The comic book works as an expansion of the series' universe by focusing on a different story that occurred when the children were smaller than they were on the show. It could also be considered a standalone adapted comic book because it includes a flashback intended to narrate events that took place on Earth before it was destroyed. This different time frame (concerning the period covered by the HBO Max audiovisual production) involves a distinct portion of the main plotline: the early rise of the necromancer androids that forced humans to leave their planet and how the trauma of these high-tech monsters still haunts their new home in the remote Kepler-22b.

Although Aaron Guzikowski is working in a different medium, the character treatment, the style, the themes, and the concept of *Raised by Wolves # 1: Hark, the Herald Angel Sings* do not differ fundamentally from the audiovisual show. The characterization of Mother, Father, and the children is developed and presented in a composition of traits and colors that are similar to the show. The visual adaptation drawn by the artist Meghan Hetrick reimagines the characters' corporality and the settings in a manner that captures the televisual details of the HBO Max production. The whole comic book possesses a certain natural hand-drawn characteristic that visually elevates the product if we compare it to recent comics, which rely heavily on digital illustrator tools. The use of colors by Nick Filardi is also very efficient because it captures the palette of tones and textures of the show. The whole visual narrative of the digital comic book – including the way the story is told through images, the composition of the pages, and the sequence of panels – seems to be very fluid and, from the perspective of viewers, it transports the readers to the universe of the series. The text lettering designed by Marshall Dillon in the dialogue balloons of the webcomic, as well as in the narrative panels and the necromancer sound effects, is very legible, and it interacts aesthetically with the visual narrative. All these formal aspects of the comic book demonstrate a cohesive creative interflow between different art forms, media, and genres.

In terms of the transposition from screen to page, *Raised by Wolves # 1: Hark, the Herald Angel Sings* presents – to borrow Baetens's insights (74-75) – two categories of transformation: diegetic and psychological. As for Baetens's first category, the comic book expands the show's diegetic universe by focusing on the characters' backstories. New characters, locations, and situations are included, providing insights into the characters' thought processes and more details about their background. For example, the third page presents a flashback to the year 2120, a few decades before the beginning of the main plotline of the online show. Unlike the audiovisual production, there is a panoramic view of the Mithraic Capital, where a crowd gathers at a public square surrounded by futuristic palaces. The comic book also introduces new characters, such as a few of Mother's children (who perished years before the start of the show), and, most notably, presents the Mithraic leader. From the balcony of his sacred palace, he informs the public that their deity, Sol Invictus, has finally shown them that "the Fifth Force of Nature is real!" (Guzikowski 3) and introduces the necromancers.

The comic book presents a new situation to provide a backstory to the emergence of these technological military androids. In the story, the Mithraic leader announces that



“the time has come to purify the earth for the coming of His light” (Guzikowski 3). A squadron of nine armored necromancers is seen hovering over the crowd. The only necromancer presented in the dramatic series is Mother, but the comic book reveals that there are at least eight more. While androids fly in military formation, the crowd of zealots praises their Mithraic god with a “Hail Sol!”, and the power of the necromancer is revealed on a snowy night of the following winter. Then, two soldiers from the atheistic resistance stand guard at a checkpoint in a heavily bombarded part of the city. They look at the sky and see what they believe to be a “naked woman” hovering over them, her bronze armor and her terrible eyes catching their attention. Suddenly, she emits a powerful scream that immediately makes them explode into bits and pieces of blood and tissue.

The creative strategy adopted by the showrunners might have been to counter some critics’ accusations of obscurity and incoherence (Poniewozik 1) with the publication of the comic book adaptation to provide viewers with more context or explanation of the most provocative or unsettling aspects of this science fiction and fantasy story. The comic book functions, thus, as a prequel because the story *Hark, the Herald Angel Sings* precedes that of the first season of *Raised by Wolves* by focusing on diegetic events that occur before the beginning of the TV series.

For this reason, the comic adaptation, concerning diegetic changes, spans a different period of the story, offering readers visual access to planet Earth prior to the year 2145. On the show streamed by HBO Max, the focus of the narrative involves humanity’s new home: the planet Kepler-22b. This flashback proposed by the comic book contains insights into the emergence of the necromancers as a “Fifth Force of Nature” capable of being decisive in the war against the atheist rebels. The comic book inevitably amplifies the diegetic universe by including new characters, locations, and situations that are interesting to enlighten the backstories of figures like Mother, the Mithraic believers, and Campion.

Concerning Baetens’s second category, Guzikowski’s digital comic book also consolidates a psychological transformation compared to the adapted series. When he reimagines the audiovisual story from screen to page, the novelization constructs a brief visual narrative with passages containing character motivations and psychological clarification. Unlike the show, which does not elaborate much on the collective imagination permeating the eruption of the holy war in the twentieth-second century, the comic book provides a few insights into the Mithraic leaders’ jihad mentality. The religious leader is shown persuading his believers to accept the planet’s obliteration in the

name of ideals of purification and redemption. This ironic representation of the Mithraic doctrine as psychological manipulation contrasts with the dramatic series, as it depicts the god Sol Invictus as being real and communicating with an atheist impostor, Marcus Drusus (portrayed by Travis Fimmel).

The showrunners probably felt that there were psychological elements of Mother and the other characters that were not fully developed or even created in the show. Given the action-packed plot of the television series, some aspects of the first years of the Kepler-22b atheistic colony were vague. Guzikowski may have felt that Mother had deeper emotional nuances that were worth exploring in the adaptation to comics. As novelizations usually do, *Raised by Wolves # 1: Hark, the Herald Angel Sings* presents a different facet of the main character. In the show, Lamia seems to struggle with her reprogramming from a necromancer assassin to Mother and with the demands imposed upon her and Father. Together, these androids frequently seem to symbolize robotic versions of Adam and Eve suffering in this new hostile postmodern post-postlapsarian Eden. In the comic book, she seems more emotionally available to her children, especially to the boy Champion (named after Mother's "creator", the android engineer Champion Sturges). She embraces the child and often sings lullabies for him to sleep. Their relationship in the TV series is tenser and less affectionate because in the show, Champion (portrayed by Winta McGrath) is older and more questioning of her authority.

In the beginning of the digital comic book, Mother is sitting by the fire with Father and the family on a cold night. She tells the children what it was like on the planet where they came from, explaining that the Earth "was a good planet, and it would have lasted much longer if only the humans who lived there could have found peaceful ways to resolve their differences" (Guzikowski 2). Then, she explains how the necromancers were used in the war to annihilate the opposition. She says that the believers claimed the technical specifications for the necromancer were encrypted within their most ancient scriptures. She admits nonetheless that the atheists were ultimately responsible for making life on Earth impossible because of their reaction to the believers' attacks: "The atheists tried valiantly to stop the necromancers with bombs – bombs that blanketed the Earth with fire. Sadly, not only did this tactic fail to destroy the necromancers... it also rendered the earth uninhabitable" (Guzikowski 5). Rather than scaring the human children with this story, they seem to be excited by the killing androids. They even make necromancer-shaped straw dolls to play with. To make them scarier, they set the

necromancer dolls on fire. While playing with them, Campion stumbles and accidentally incinerates one of the crops.

In the face of this incident, Guzikowski goes deeper than the TV series into the reasoning processes that led the androids to make controversial parenting decisions. In the digital comic book, Mother and Father discuss how to discipline Campion and the others. They are certain that the children know that the androids were built exclusively to nurture humans and that they could never do any harm to them. They believe that, psychologically, the children have no incentive to obey them. Based on this idea, the androids “feel” they must resort to some form of deception just until the children’s brains are fully formed. Father argues that perhaps they need to suggest the existence of a “boogeyman”: “It’s an Earth myth about a deranged human who preys on children who refuse to behave” (Guzikowski 6). Based on this idea, Mother decides to convince them that necromancers are attracted to bad behavior.

This idea of reinforcing an old earthly superstition to psychologically manipulate the children proves to be an objectionable solution. Campion is very intelligent and notices the inconsistency: “You said the Mithraic won’t get here until we’re older. And you also said there won’t be any necromancers aboard their ark. They’re just as afraid of them as the atheists were” (Guzikowski 7). Mother is compelled by the circumstances to fabricate additional falsehoods to sustain the “boogeyman” narrative. She tells Campion that she had failed to mention that the necromancers are attracted to bad behavior: “It’s like a magnet to them. And it doesn’t matter how many light-years away you are... every time you do a bad thing, they get a little bit closer” (Guzikowski 7). The children have a terrified look on their faces when Mother explains the necromancers’ killing techniques: “It need only raise its voice, and should you hear it, [...] it will get into your brain and kill you... But these are not matters you need to concern yourself with, Campion. As Father said, it’s only bad behavior that attracts them” (Guzikowski 7).

*Raised by Wolves* is a show that contains many paradoxes, like, for example, the idea of repurposing a lethal machine to nurture and save humanity (Gefen 204).<sup>5</sup> The

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<sup>5</sup> Some other paradoxes of the show include not only the fact that an android monster responsible for genocide is the same that guarantees the survival of humanity, but also that the religious faction that intends to save the world precipitates its complete destruction. Though androids are considered soulless machines, they are nonetheless among the ranks of the religious. Also, the technocratic atheistic faction can be sometimes more dogmatic and intolerant than the theocratic believers. The show also includes an atheist impostor who seems to be chosen by the god Sol Invictus to lead the believers. Finally, considering the comic book as part of the characters’ arcs, the atheistic androids invent a false superstition to discipline the children but end up traumatizing them, which clearly contradicts their programming.

comic book reinforces these paradoxes by showing that Mother and Father – two androids with highly advanced artificial intelligence programmed by technocrat atheists – rely on the same types of superstition and falsehood that skeptics accuse believers of having. The practical result of this mind trick perpetrated by the androids is to cause Campion to have terrible nightmares. When Lamia runs to his bedroom after hearing him cry in desperation, he reveals that in his dream, there was a necromancer: “I heard it screaming in my dream! Don’t let me die, Mother, please!” (Guzikowski 8). Seeing the consequences of her mistake, she is forced to confess the truth that “the necromancers will never leave what remains of Earth. Father and I were just trying to keep [the children] from misbehaving”.

As suggested by the comic book, the cognitive processing of an android “mother” may simulate a complexity comparable to that of a human mind. Although they are equipped with an enormous repertoire of scientific information and technology, Father and Mother’s attitudes show that raising children on a remote planet can be “psychologically” challenging. In the end, little Campion, lying on Mother’s lap, asks her to sing him “that funny song” that always makes him sleepy. Strangely, she starts to hum Wesley and Mendelssohn’s Christmas carol *Hark! The Herald Angel Sings* as a lullaby. Even though the child feels calmer and goes back to sleep, the psychological damage has been done. The final page implies that Campion starts to dream again about a new attack from a necromancer, who screams sonic blasts so powerfully that concrete walls break into pieces (Guzikowski 9).

As has been noted earlier, regarding the psychological transformations of the adapted story, there is a slightly different treatment of the android caretakers, especially Mother. The author not only seems to capture her distinctive characteristics, but he also adds a few layers sub-textually as well as psychologically. The development and presentation of the characters in the television show often render her relationship with Campion intense and occasionally unaffectionate. The main action of the comic book suggests that their relationship might have deteriorated after she and Father decided to tell the children lies to discipline them. They attempt to infuse fear in their human family by associating the destructive necromancers with the old superstition of the boogeyman. The comic book depicts the android progenitors as “psychologically” complex. Mother’s constant struggle to keep them alive, to protect them in an inhospitable new world in the aftermath of Earth’s destruction, and to do her job makes her “feel” anxious.

As my discussion so far suggests, she later appears to regret the decision to rely on such a mediocre mind trick, but it is too late, and the psychological damage upon the children is already done. The comic book suggests that the infliction of this psychological trauma is perhaps the reason why *Campion*, especially in the second season of the dramatic series, develops an ambivalent relationship with Mother. It is possible that, at some sub-conscious level, his mind starts to conflate her image of a nurturing Mother with that of the necromancer terminator android she used to be before her reprogramming. This situation developed in the comic book may suggest additional symbolic meanings to the title *Raised by Wolves*, a space drama that revisits the Old Testament's original sin and the Garden of Eden. The fall of trust between the android and human family members, as frequently depicted in the show, may be attributable to this "original sin" – a reiteration of moments like the one presented in the comic book when *Campion* became acutely conscious of the full extent of Mother's dishonesty.

## Conclusion

Following Baetens's categories of transformation (74-75), our study shows that Guzikowski's comic book contributes – as the discussion above has demonstrated – to a greater sense of transmedia storytelling by implementing a few diegetic and psychological transformations in the preexisting television content. Novelizations from screen-based content to textual or visual environments expand the genre's adaptability through fusion with emerging media and digital streaming technologies. Thus, examining novelizations can prove advantageous for scholars and critics, as these works offer opportunities to develop new theories and gain a deeper understanding of media-related texts and their interrelationships with various media forms.

Considering our discussion on Guzikowski's *Raised by Wolves # 1: Hark, the Herald Angel Sings*, it becomes clear that this kind of visual novelization constructs a transmedia universe that is very reminiscent of the whole concept of the HBO Max show. Novelizations – frequently used as significant vehicles for transmedial expansion – are particularly conducive to science fiction and fantasy due to these genres' inherent emphasis on extensive world-building. This compatibility highlights novelization as a quintessential point of convergence between the science fiction and fantasy fan communities and their preferred franchises' transmedial expansions, thereby facilitating a coherent integration of these genres into new narrative formats. Put differently, given that the art of worldbuilding in select science fiction and fantasy works can be executed

in such an immersive way that one might perceive a particular fictional universe as “something that can be existed in” (Mendlesohn 71), it follows that both written novelizations and visual novelizations can be recognized as significant genres favoring universe expansion and transmedia storytelling. These forms not only enrich the fictional universes they explore by contributing to making them function on all levels as a complete world but also play pivotal roles in extending and diversifying the narrative experiences across multiple media platforms.

If Internet postings are to be believed, the *Raised by Wolves* world has already expanded not only to its adapted digital comic book but also to *Raised by Wolves* Reddit and Facebook communities in which some members frequently respond to each other’s comments with a “Hail Sol!”, a salutation that references the deity that governs the fictional universe of Ridley Scott’s show. If the series had been renewed for additional seasons, it would not have been unexpected to encounter segments of the most devoted fans beginning to incorporate the fictional Mithraic religious practices portrayed in the show into their cosplay or role-playing activities. This demonstrates that the world constructed through the speculative endeavors of science fiction and fantasy authors is designed to possess such intrinsic coherence that it develops independently, almost autonomously, beyond the author’s immediate control. As Mendlesohn articulates, “out of sight of the author it forms itself” (71). Consequently, a fictional religion built into an entirely imaginary diegetic world may, in turn, attract adherents in the empirical world as part of a postmodernist sort of universe expansion.

To conclude, the creative interflow that occurs between these two different media and genres – i.e., the *Raised by Wolves* show and the comic book – suggests that perhaps this is the reason why the television incarnation of Campion grew up to be so skeptical of Mother’s decisions and commands. As the prequel comic demonstrates, Lamia had already fooled him at least once by trying to instill psychological terror in the children. This dialogic interaction between both art forms clearly illustrates the principle of transmedia storytelling. When the show viewers read the comic book, the fictional universe inevitably expands, and the story of the necromancers unfolds across the media platforms, with each separate “text” making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole of the *Raised by Wolves* saga. Analyzing these aspects may be useful to better understand visual novelization and its relationship with science fiction and fantasy productions in our era of media convergence.



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Photo: Elisa Azevedo

**Hell Hath No Fury:**  
**The Madonna-Whore Dichotomy in HBO's *House of the Dragon***

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**Abstract** | *House of the Dragon* is HBO's prequel to *Game of Thrones*. It adapts an assortment of supplementary *A Song of Ice and Fire* material, primarily the novella *The Rogue Prince*. The original text was presented to the reader as a historical document from the fictional Seven Kingdoms of Westeros, which recounts the reign of King Viserys Targaryen and the succession crisis that occurs when he names his daughter Rhaenyra as heir to the Iron Throne. Showrunners Ryan Condal and Miguel Sapochnik faithfully adapt George R. R. Martin's novellas, with all the key characters represented and all the main events dramatized. However, *House of the Dragon* also transforms its source material by expanding the characterisation of the knight Criston Cole. This change introduces a new psychological interpretation that was not readily apparent in Martin's novella. In the early episodes of the series, we see that Ser Criston is fiercely loyal to Princess Rhaenyra. However, halfway through the season, he is dismayed by her liberal approach to marriage

and sexuality, and after suffering a mental breakdown, he devotes himself to the prim and proper Queen Alicent. Thus, Criston, along with many other Westerosi men and women, are shown to perceive these two female rulers through the lens of the Madonna-whore dichotomy and ally themselves accordingly. Where Sigmund Freud's theory of the Madonna-whore dichotomy focused on the psychological tendencies of individual men, feminist scholars argue that it signifies a social belief or attitude that seeks to reinforce patriarchy and restrict women's autonomy. For instance, Bronwyn Conrad demonstrates how the dichotomy defines female sexuality as "fitting one of two rigid social scripts", pressuring women to follow the "chaste path" or be seen as unsuitable wives and mothers, as well as – in Rhaenyra's case – unsuitable queens.

**Keywords** | George R. R. Martin; *Game of Thrones*; Patriarchy; Feminism; Social Script



**Resumo** | *House of the Dragon* é a prequela de *Game of Thrones*, da HBO. Adapta uma variedade de material suplementar de *A Song of Ice and Fire*, principalmente a novela *The Rogue Prince*. O texto original foi apresentado ao leitor como um documento histórico dos fictícios Sete Reinos de Westeros, que relata o reinado do Rei Viserys Targaryen e a crise de sucessão que ocorre quando este nomeia a sua filha Rhaenyra como herdeira do Trono de Ferro. Os produtores Ryan Condal e Miguel Sapochnik adaptam fielmente as novelas de George R. R. Martin, com todas as personagens principais representadas e todos os acontecimentos principais dramatizados. No entanto, *House of the Dragon* também transforma o seu material de origem ao expandir a caracterização do cavaleiro Criston Cole. Esta mudança introduz uma nova interpretação psicológica que não era imediatamente aparente na novela de Martin. Nos primeiros episódios da série, vemos que Sor Criston é extremamente leal à Princesa Rhaenyra. No entanto, a meio da temporada, este fica consternado com a abordagem liberal dela em relação ao casamento e à sexualidade e, após sofrer um colapso mental, dedica-se à recatada Rainha Alicent. Assim, Criston, juntamente com muitos outros homens e mulheres de Westeros, percebem estas duas governantes femininas através de uma visão dicotómica Madonna-prostituta e aliam-se em conformidade. Enquanto a teoria do Complexo de Madonna-prostituta de Sigmund Freud se centrava nas tendências psicológicas dos homens, as investigadoras académicas feministas defendem que significa uma crença ou atitude social que procura reforçar o patriarcado e restringir a autonomia das mulheres. Por exemplo, Bronwyn Conrad demonstra como a dicotomia define a sexualidade feminina como "adequada a

um dos dois rígidos guiões sociais”, pressionando as mulheres a seguir o “caminho casto” ou a serem vistas como esposas e mães inadequadas, bem como – no caso de Rhaenyra – rainhas desadequadas.

**Palavras-Chave** | George R. R. Martin; *Game of Thrones*; Patriarcado; Feminismo; Roteiro Social



Whoever wrote that “hell hath no fury like a woman scorned” obviously never witnessed a *man* scorned. In *House of the Dragon*, Ser Criston Cole, the spurned lover of Rhaenyra Targaryen, demonstrates the apocalyptic consequences of male anxiety around female sexuality and power. Criston also exemplifies the patriarchal perception of women as either chaste, pure “Madonnas” to be protected, or promiscuous, seductive “whores” to be vanquished.

*House of the Dragon* is HBO’s prequel to *Game of Thrones*, being set around 200 years prior to that series. It adapts an assortment of supplementary *A Song of Ice and Fire* material, primarily the novella *The Rogue Prince*, which George R. R. Martin published in 2014. The original text was presented to the reader as a historical document from the fictional Seven Kingdoms of Westeros, which recounts the reign of King Viserys Targaryen and the succession crisis that occurs when he names his daughter Rhaenyra as heir to the Iron Throne. Contesting Rhaenyra’s ascendance is Viserys’ second wife, Alicent Hightower, who covets the crown for her son Aegon. While the first eight episodes of *House of the Dragon* translate *The Rogue Prince*, the final two episodes, as well as the upcoming seasons, translate the novella *The Princess and the Queen* (2013), in which Viserys’ death ignites a fiery civil war between the two royal factions.<sup>1</sup>

Showrunners Ryan Condal and Miguel Sapochnik faithfully adapt Martin’s novellas, with all the key characters represented and all the main events dramatized. Furthermore, the series received widespread acclaim from critics and fans, many of whom were disappointed by the chaotic writing that plagued the latter seasons of *Game of Thrones* and welcomed the prequel’s return to court intrigue and complex, well-

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<sup>1</sup> Both novellas were republished in Martin’s 2018 novel *Fire and Blood*, which surveys the first 150 years of the Targaryen dynasty.

developed characters. Generous praise was reserved for Paddy Constantine's "touching" portrayal as Viserys Targaryen (Chayka), with even Martin admitting to the actor that "your Viserys is better than [mine]" (Starkey).

However, *House of the Dragon* also transforms its source material by implementing two significant changes: it depicts Rhaenyra and Alicent as childhood friends, and it expands Criston Cole's characterisation. In the novellas, Alicent is a decade older than Rhaenyra, and for the most part, the teenage princess is described as having a frosty relationship with her stepmother. Similarly, the romantic relationship between Ser Criston and Rhaenrya is only *rumoured* in the novellas and the reasons behind their falling out are never revealed. Despite playing a vital role in the events of the war, Martin devotes very little ink to Criston. Indeed, because the novellas are framed as part of a historical document written hundreds of years after the events in question have transpired, they provide nothing about the inner thoughts or motivations of the characters and feature very little direct dialogue. *The Rogue Prince* and *The Princess and the Queen* form a starkly different narrative than *A Song of Ice and Fire*, with the original series being experienced by the reader from the direct points-of-view of the characters. Consequently, the showrunners of *House of the Dragon* were required to develop characters and write dialogue practically from scratch whilst also maintaining consistency with the historical framework that Martin had created. Their decision to elaborate and complicate the relationships of Rhaenyra, Alicent and Criston introduces a new psychological interpretation that was not readily apparent in the original novellas. In the early episodes of the series, we see that Ser Criston is fiercely loyal to Princess Rhaenyra. However, halfway through the season, he is dismayed by her liberal approach to marriage and sexuality, and after suffering a mental breakdown he devotes himself to the prim and proper Queen Alicent. Thus, Criston, along with many other Westerosi men and women, are shown to perceive these two female rulers through the lens of the Madonna-whore dichotomy and ally themselves accordingly.

The concept of the Madonna-whore dichotomy (MWD) was originally proposed by Sigmund Freud, who used it to diagnose male patients who were unable to maintain sexual arousal in a committed, loving relationship. Freud theorized that these men had experienced a split between the affectionate and sexual currents of human desire, and that "where such men love they have no desire and where they desire they cannot love" (44). Clinical psychologist Uwe Hartmann asserts that though many of Freud's sexual theories are now considered antiquated and sexist, his psychoanalytic notion of the Madonna-

where complex is “still quite viable and pervasive in modern sexual dynamics and gender roles” (2333). Where Freud’s theory focused on the psychological tendencies of individual men, feminist scholars argue that the MWD signifies a social belief or attitude that seeks to reinforce patriarchy and restrict women’s autonomy. For instance, Bronwyn Conrad demonstrates how the MWD defines female sexuality as “fitting one of two rigid social scripts”, pressuring women to follow the “chaste path” or be seen as unsuitable wives and mothers (309-310), as well as – in Rhaenyra’s case – unsuitable queens.

The prospect of female power is a central theme of *House of the Dragon*. The opening scene of episode one (“The Heirs of the Dragon”) depicts a great council convened by the former King Jaehaerys Targaryen to choose his heir: the gathered lords elect the king’s eldest grandson Viserys over his slightly older granddaughter Rhaenys. This decision reinforces the Westerosi tradition of males inheriting titles, wealth, and properties over females, and it stems from the perception that men are better suited to the roles and responsibilities of leadership, especially military leadership (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). Male-preferenced primogeniture was firmly established among the Andals, the ethnic group that dominates the southern kingdoms; however, it appears less fixed among the Targaryen and Velaryon dynasties, who only migrated to Westeros over the past two centuries. This is likely due to the role of dragons in Valyrian culture: the Andal assumption that physical strength makes men better rulers is rendered moot by dragons, who are capable of destroying entire armies and are ridden by both men and women. The fact that dragons can also change their sexual anatomy further disrupts the notion of male superiority. In the nine years since Viserys’ crowning, Rhaenys comes to be regarded as “The Queen Who Never Was”. The moniker suggests a nostalgic yearning among certain sections of the population, with Rhaenys personifying the parallel reality in which women are able to govern their own lives and the world around them. Likewise, she also represents an existential threat to other sections of the population, whose position within and understanding of reality depends upon patriarchy. Notably, the show does not necessarily classify these opposing positions along gender lines, with female characters like Alicent advocating traditional gender roles, while male characters such as Corlys Velaryon (Rhaenys’ husband) back reform. This depiction endorses the sociological research of Mary R. Jackman, which found that members of disadvantaged groups – such as women and the working class – often internalize and endorse ideologies that “justify and reinforce the existing social hierarchy” (10). Indeed, even Rhaenys seems resigned to “the order of things”, attempting to dissuade Rhaenyra from pursuing the crown by

telling her that “men would sooner put the realm to the torch than see a woman ascend the Iron Throne” (“The Rogue Prince”). The advice is delivered with a mix of sympathy and contempt, endeavoring to spare Rhaenyra the same heartbreak that she experienced, while also rebuking her for presuming to grasp what Rhaenys could not. Yet, while Rhaenys never sat on the Iron Throne, the possibility that she *might have* gives Rhaenyra the confidence to press her claim and grants many others the capacity to *imagine* a queen of the Seven Kingdoms.

Viserys is initially resolute on fathering a male heir (much to Rhaenyra’s chagrin), but the loss of his first wife Aemma and the callous behavior of his younger brother Daemon prompt him to rethink this course. Prior to her death, Queen Aemma tells her husband that she cannot bear to suffer any more miscarriages and that, regardless of the outcome, this will be her final pregnancy. During a harrowing labor, Grand Maester Mellos informs Viserys that the only way to save the child is to cut directly into the womb; distraught – but desperate for a son – the king agrees, only to witness his terrified wife die in his hands and their newborn child perish a day later. Aemma’s suffering weighs heavily on Viserys and exemplifies the brutal cost of male primogeniture on women’s bodies and minds. Later, he learns that Daemon mocked the dead child by declaring him “heir for a day” in the middle of a brothel. These remarks epitomize the toxic masculine traits that saturate Westerosi culture, particularly cruelty, selfishness, and the need to dominate others. “My family has just been destroyed”, the king admonishes, “but instead of being by my side, or Rhaenyra’s, you chose to celebrate your own rise!” (“The Heirs of the Dragon”). Even Daemon seems to acknowledge the harmful effects that male emotional repression can have on people, claiming that mockery was the only way he could mourn his nephew’s death.<sup>2</sup> These two events are instrumental in Viserys’ decision to subvert patriarchal traditions by naming Rhaenyra the first female heir to the Iron Throne.

Princess Rhaenyra herself challenges Westerosi gender norms in various ways. She is wilful and adventurous, preferring to ride her dragon Syrax rather than attend to her royal duties, and she often wears riding leathers instead of dresses. She enjoys watching tourneys and unlike the other court ladies, does not avert her eyes during moments of bloodshed. Despite being appointed only as a cupbearer, she offers her own

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<sup>2</sup> Given his erectile dysfunction issues, it’s possible Daemon is portrayed as suffering from the original clinical definition of the Madonna-whore complex, in which a man struggles to maintain sexual desire towards women with whom he feels emotional affection.

opinion on politics during meetings of the small council. When tasked with appointing a new member of the Kingsguard, she rejects the suggestions of the king's counselors and chooses the common-born knight Criston Cole. Her father proposes several marriage candidates, but she rejects them all and convinces Viserys to allow her to wed someone of her choosing. She is unenthused at the prospect of childbirth, telling her mother that she'd "rather serve as a knight and ride to battle and glory" ("The Heirs of the Dragon"). This behavior stands in direct contrast to her best friend Alicent Hightower, who is modest and studious, wears elegant dresses, is obedient to her father and septa, and marries and bears children out of duty to her house. In episode four ("King of the Narrow Sea"), when discussing the princess' various suitors, Alicent calls their flattering "romantic", but Rhaenyra retorts that being "imprisoned in a castle and made to squeeze out heirs" is not her idea of romance. As Rhaenyra grows older, her adventurous spirit extends into the realms of sexuality. Later in the episode, she sneaks out of the Red Keep at night and accompanies her uncle Daemon to the Street of Silk, where they drink wine, watch a mummer's show, and visit a brothel. Rhaenyra is fascinated by the spectacle of naked men and women coupling around her, and responds hungrily to Daemon's advances. However, he cuts the encounter short and abruptly exits, leaving her feeling frustrated and unfulfilled: she returns to her room and beckons Ser Criston to enter and quench her desires.

The sex scene between them is notable for the way it reverses the conventional power dynamics of heterosexual intercourse. Criston is a strong knight who is armed and armored, yet he responds shyly to Rhaenyra's advances. She begins by snatching his helmet and teasing him as he tries to retrieve it; he leans closer to her body before retreating sheepishly. She exploits the fact that her superior social station and his role as her sworn protector prevent him from using actual force or even touching her royal body, rendering him helpless to resolve the situation. She is also exploiting the contradiction between his vow of chastity and vow of obedience. Rhaenyra then begins to undress him, unfastening his armor and exposing his vulnerable flesh to her caresses. While Criston may be adept at answering to male violence and aggression, he is bewildered and defenceless in the face of female seduction. This is because Rhaenyra's actions are altering the conventional sexual script dictating that "men should act as sexual instigators and women as careful gatekeepers" (Frith 110). Eventually, he reciprocates her affections, but not before reverently placing his white cloak over a chair, lest it be stained by sin. Contrary to the classical cinematic depiction of heterosexuality, the viewer identifies with

the female's gaze rather than the male's: Rhaenyra remains clothed while the camera focuses on her hands as they move over Criston's body, unveiling his hairy Dornish skin, sliding around his muscular chest and arms, and pulling his lips into hers. He is – what film theorist Laura Mulvey calls – the object of “visual desire” (6). The scene depicts assertive female sexuality as a potential source of power over men. According to social scientists Peter Glick and Susan T. Fiske, as the traditional instigators of sexual activity, “men fear women's ability to use sexual allure as a manipulative tactic” (491). The MWD attempts to mitigate this perceived threat by praising women for withholding or suppressing their sexuality and stigmatizing women for expressing or enjoying sexuality. Recent social psychology research shows that “men penalize women who assert sexual agency just as they do women who assert power in other ways”, such as political or economic power (Infanger et al. 7). Such penalties range from social exclusion to physical and psychological abuse and neglect.

Ser Criston follows a very conventional social script. He expresses his masculinity through fighting and dominating other men, and through protecting and honoring women. This is demonstrated in the Tourney for the Heir, in which he defeats every opponent and asks for the favor of Princess Rhaenyra, who rewards him with a laurel wreath. He is a devout follower of the Seven and claims that “every woman is an image of the Mother, to be spoken of with reverence” (“The Green Council”). He views himself as the stereotypical white knight of medieval mythology and often casts Rhaenyra as the damsel in distress. For example, during the royal hunt in episode three (“Second of His Name”), he rescues her from a wild boar and offers to slay the white hart stag for her. Likewise, in episode five (“We Light the Way”), when a fight breaks out between two of her suitors, he hurries her from the hall and shields her gaze from the bloodshed. However, in both instances, Rhaenyra veers from the script, being the one who actually delivers the killing blow to the boar and is eager to see which of her suitors was victorious. After they have sex, Criston becomes the one in distress, as he is consumed by guilt for breaking his Kingsguard vows. However, he manages to reframe the narrative in his mind so that Rhaenyra still needs to be rescued and he can still be the hero: he offers to marry her and take her to Essos, where she can be free from the “burdens and indignities of [her] inheritance”. However, she rebuffs him:

I am the crown, Ser Criston. Or I will be. I may chafe at my duties, but do you think I would choose infamy in exchange for a bushel of oranges



or a ship to Asshai? It is my duty to marry a nobleman from a great house and Ser Laenor will make a fine husband. But my, um... my marriage... does not have to be the end. Ser Criston, Laenor and I have an understanding. I've granted him leave to pursue his own interests... and in turn, he's granted me the same. ("We Light the Way")

Criston is insulted, exclaiming "so you want me to be your whore?" and Rhaenyra inadvertently salts the wound by calling him "my white knight", laying bare the falsehood of his self-image. He is also insulted by the fact that Rhaenyra has shattered the image of the virtuous and helpless damsel that he had projected onto her. Later, when questioned by Alicent about Rhaenyra's sexual indiscretions, Criston's guilt and shame overcome him and he confesses to the affair, begging the queen to spare him castration before his execution. This reference to castration is notable because it recalls the earlier definition of the MWD proposed by Freud, who identified male castration anxiety as one of the subconscious causes of the complex (46). Criston feels metaphorically emasculated by Rhaenyra, first by her bedding him without intending to marry and then again by exerting greater power over him in their relationship, thereby relegating him to the role of – in his mind – the woman... the "whore". Having been made to feel insignificant, degraded and dominated, Criston expresses to Alicent his fear of losing what he feels is the last vestige of his manhood. While on guard duty at Rhaenyra's wedding celebration, Criston is approached by the male lover of Laenor Velaryon, Rhaenyra's betrothed: the man reveals his knowledge of Criston's and Rhaenyra's affair but promises to keep it a secret if Criston does the same for his and Laenor's affair. Criston responds by beating Laenor's lover to death. It is unclear exactly what motivates this action. It may have stemmed from disgust at how traditional gender roles and sacred marriage vows were being subverted. It may have sprung from anger and jealousy towards Laenor for having usurped his beloved. Or it may have been Criston's last desperate attempt to reassert his masculinity in the only way he knows how: violence and domination. Afterwards, the white knight retreats to the godswood to commit suicide, but Queen Alicent stops him and instead promotes him to her personal guard.

In the ten years since he was spurned by Rhaenyra, Ser Criston reframes her in his mind from *Madonna* to *whore* – or as he says, "a spider who stings and sucks her prey dry" ("The Princess and the Queen"). He sees her as a wicked seductress who "soiled [his] white cloak", thereby absolving his own actions. Conversely, he comes to associate Queen Alicent with the stereotype of the Madonna, someone to protect and worship – the

kind and benevolent queen who delivered him from death and dishonor. Crucial to her achieving this status in Criston's mind is that, while he loves Alicent, he does not desire her sexually. And even if he did, her apparent virtue and loyalty to her husband would never allow this desire to be reciprocated. Other citizens of the Seven Kingdoms also conform to this dichotomy, allying with Alicent and her children because they perceive her as the virtuous and traditional wife, while opposing Rhaenyra's claim to the Iron Throne because they regard her as immoral and unorthodox. Otto Hightower, the Hand of the King, is the first person to question the princess' status, reporting to Viserys that she had visited a brothel. Otto is motivated by the desire to see his daughter Alicent's eldest son ascend to the Iron Throne and thereby seeks to delegitimize Rhaenyra's claim by tarnishing her reputation. His heavy-handed influence over Alicent demonstrates his preference for a patriarchal society, and he is thus also motivated to ensure the Seven Kingdoms are never ruled by a female. Rhaenyra's detractors also point out that her children bear no resemblance to her husband, suggesting she has committed adultery and birthed bastards to another man or multiple men. This accusation is initially only whispered in private, but eventually, it filters down into the mouths of Alicent's children, who use it to taunt their nephews. In episode eight ("The Lord of the Tides"), Vaemon Velaryon makes a public challenge to Prince Lucerys' claim to the seat of Driftmark, declaring before the entire royal court that "[Rhaenyra's] children are *bastards*... and she is a *whore*". According to research from *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, the MWD makes it difficult to view the "nurturing" and "sensual" dimensions of women as being united in a single person (Kahalon et al. 349). Sexually liberal women, like Rhaenyra, are deemed bad mothers and thus undeserving of loyalty, protection, or commitment. Rhaenyra's opponents enforce this worldview, drawing a disparaging link between her sexual history and her worth as a mother and ruler.

Sexuality is not just used by others to differentiate Rhaenyra and Alicent, it is also the source of animosity between themselves. Alicent married Viserys out of duty rather than love, and – in accordance with her upbringing – she has been obedient and faithful to him, bearing him four children and caring for him in his ailing health. Meanwhile, Rhaenyra constantly disobeys the rules and her parents, drinks wine, visits brothels, and engages in sexual affairs with numerous men. After overhearing her father's report of Rhaenyra coupling with Daemon, she confronts the princess. Rhaenyra denies the accusation, and Alicent takes that to mean her friend is still a maiden. Unfortunately, siding with Rhaenyra results in her father being stripped of the office of Hand and she

later learns that Rhaenyra is having sex with Ser Criston. Alicent feels betrayed, partly by being lied to and manipulated by the princess, but also because she resents the fact that Rhaenyra's breaking of gender norms is not punished, while her own abidance of the *status quo* goes unrewarded. The injustice of her life is best exemplified during her sex scene with Viserys, in which she is summoned to his bed chamber in the middle of the night and lies still and expressionless while the ageing man grunts and thrusts on top of her. Her feelings of disgust are captured by the image of a large rat creeping up the chamber wall, her gaze fixing on the vermin in grim contemplation of her circumstances. This scene is intercut with the more playful and passionate sex scene between Rhaenyra and Criston, in which the woman initiates the encounter, and it proceeds out of mutual desire rather than duty.<sup>3</sup> Olivia Cooke, the actor who plays Alicent as an adult, has described her character as "incredibly closeted" (@thinkercook). This suggests that she harbors desires that are not merely discouraged by her society – such as heterosexual female desire – but which are completely inexpressible. The possibility of homosexual repression, combined with her intimate childhood relationship with Rhaenyra, adds another layer of subtext to her feelings of betrayal.

Alicent is equally vexed by the fact that Rhaenyra bears children that are clearly not her husband's: "She flaunts the privilege of her inheritance without shame. She expects everyone in the Red Keep to deny the truth our eyes can all plainly see. And the King... [does] naught but make excuses for her" ("The Princess and the Queen"). Thus, like Criston, she also comes to view Rhaenyra as the stereotypical *whore*, beguiling and deceiving all around her. Her resentment eventually boils into violent rage after one of her sons is maimed by one of Rhaenyra's sons. "What have I done but what was expected of me?", she demands, holding a dagger at her former friend. "Forever upholding the kingdom, the family, the law, while you flout all to do all as you please. Where is duty? Where is sacrifice? It's trampled under your pretty foot again!" ("Driftmark"). It is telling that, while Alicent is deeply frustrated and disappointed with her life, rather than blaming the patriarchy that oppresses her, she begrudges Rhaenyra for not suffering alongside her. The older princess Rhaenys summarizes the queen's position deftly, stating: "You are wiser than I believed you to be, Alicent Hightower. And yet you toil still in service to men. Your father, your husband, your son. You desire not to be free, but to make a window in the wall of your prison" ("The Green Council").

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<sup>3</sup> While Criston has conflicting feelings about the affair, he is depicted as a willing participant.

According to Jackman, “women play an important part in reinforcing patriarchal arrangements” (12). For example, many women support sexist beliefs – such as men’s role in protecting and providing for them – because they view it as benevolent and beneficial (Glick and Fiske 491). Likewise, the fact that the MWD elevates certain women to a pedestal seems to produce a positive outcome, thereby perpetuating gender inequality through – what Jackman terms – “sweet persuasion” (15). Women who believe that they fall into the category of *Madonnas* “may feel good about, and even empowered by, this idealization”, even though it carries a “component of external and internal policing” (Jackman 17-18).

Alicent is loved by many in the realm, especially men who admire her adherence to the social hierarchy and to gender norms, and she deliberately propagates this reputation of herself as a *Madonna*. For example, she replaces many of the Targaryen sigils around King’s Landing with banners bearing the seven-pointed star – the sacred symbol of the Faith of the Seven – and takes to wearing muted, long-sleeved gowns with a star pendant. In doing so, she asserts that she and her family are devoted followers of the Faith, equipped to govern morally; this piety places them in stark contrast to the depraved reputation of Rhaenyra and her second husband Daemon. She also appeals to the native customs of the Andal houses in favor of the “queer customs” of the Targaryens. This use of religious iconography is significant because it evokes the dichotomous view of women as *Madonnas* or *whores* in Judeo-Christian theology and art.

However, Alicent struggles to uphold this narrative in her private life. For example, where the *Madonna* is believed to possess idyllic maternal qualities, Alicent’s eldest son Aegon is shown to be arrogant, lecherous, and often drunk, while her second eldest son Aemond is vindictive and brutal. These personalities are encouraged by Ser Criston, who has taken an active role in their education and induction into manhood. Conversely, while the *whore* is believed to be poorly suited to motherhood, Rhaenyra’s eldest sons Jacaerys and Lucerys are shown to be thoughtful, personable, and compassionate. Nevertheless, perhaps someone like Criston would regard these qualities as unmanly. In the scene where Alicent loses her temper and threatens Rhaenyra’s sons with a knife, the princess highlights the dishonesty of the queen’s *Madonna* persona: “Exhausting, wasn’t it? Hiding beneath the cloak of your own righteousness. But now they see you as you are” (Driftmark). However, the most damning scene occurs in episode nine (“The Green Council”), when it is revealed that Alicent has been prostituting herself to the royal torturer, Larys Strong: she allows him to pleasure himself to the sight of her

naked feet and in exchange he provides her intelligence reports. Despite her hypocrisy, one cannot help but sympathize with her during this scene, as it shows the demeaning cost that even royal women must pay to exercise agency in a patriarchal system. Again, though, Alicent struggles to admit that she is a victim of the system that she has dedicated her life to – having internalized much of its messaging – and instead works against challengers to the system, such as Rhaenyra.

The contradictions between Alicent and Rhaenyra's *reputations* and their *behavior* demonstrates the illegitimacy of the MWD. It is foolish and sexist to reduce all women down to one of two stereotypes, and the dichotomy is enforced more out of a desire to alleviate men's insecurities than to understand women. Ironically, while the MWD privileges men, studies show that "men who view women in such a dichotomous way show lower levels of sexual and relationship satisfaction" (Dolan). The first season of *House of the Dragon* is a fascinating and riveting dramatization of the fact that some men would rather overthrow monarchies, wage civil wars, and dance with dragons than go to therapy.



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Photo: Elisa Azevedo

## **Myth & Folklore in Popular Media: Folk Horror in the Age of Streaming**

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**Abstract** | Since the last decade, the genre of Folk Horror has seen a revival in cinema and television, leading to a rise in its popularity. This phenomenon is on par with other popular genres, namely fantasy and science fiction, which build modern mythologies but often also display the elements from old myths and folklore. These genres have maintained their relevance in the present context of streaming services and the massive amount of content the latter offers. Taking these observations into account, this article aims to contribute to the understanding of how elements from folklore manage to retain their relevance in entertainment and popular media, even in the age of streaming. To do so implies a more general discussion regarding myth, its relationship with folklore, and how both are connected with modern narratives that fuel popular franchises and the aforementioned genres of fiction. Such discussion subsequently allows us to focus on the specificities concerned with the genre of Folk Horror and how the elements from folklore that characterise it are able to gather the attention of audiences.



**Keywords** | Folk horror; Folklore; Streaming; Mythology; Cinema



**Resumo** | Desde a década passada que o género de Folk Horror tem sido alvo de um revivalismo em cinema e televisão, levando a uma ascensão na sua popularidade. Este fenómeno está a par com outros géneros populares, nomeadamente de fantasia e de ficção científica, que se constituem enquanto mitologias modernas, mas frequentemente também exibem elementos de antigos mitos e folclore. Estes géneros têm mantido a sua relevância no contexto actual de serviços de *streaming* e a quantidade massiva de conteúdos que estes oferecem. Tendo em conta estas observações, o propósito deste artigo é contribuir para a compreensão de como os elementos oriundos de folclore são capazes de reter a sua relevância em entretenimento e média popular, mesmo na era do *streaming*. Tal objectivo implica uma discussão mais geral sobre mitos, a sua relação com folclore, e como ambos estão associados com narrativas modernas que alimentam franquias populares e os géneros de ficção supracitados. Esta discussão permite-nos então focar subsequentemente nas especificidades relacionadas com o género de Folk Horror, e em como os elementos de folclore que o caracterizam têm a capacidade de suscitar a atenção das audiências.

**Palavras-chave** | Folk horror; Folclore; *Streaming*; Mitologia; Cinema



### **The Presence of Myth and Folklore in Modern Fiction**

The use of myth has been recurrent in popular fiction, most pervasively, and indeed quite explicitly, in the genres of fantasy and science fiction, with nominal examples in extremely successful fictional worlds such as Tolkien's Middle-Earth<sup>1</sup> or the far-away galaxy from George Lucas' *Star Wars*<sup>2</sup> franchise. As I will also underline, however, myth, and more specifically folklore, has exerted an influence on the genre of horror, or supernatural horror to be more specific. Nonetheless, before delving into that

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<sup>1</sup> Tolkien's mythological universe, popularized by the *Lord of the Rings* (1954) books and subsequent adaptations throughout several forms of media, has set the standard for many of the elements, tropes and commonplaces in the fantasy genre, and its influence can be identified in many other fictional fantasy worlds, whether it is in literature, cinema or video games. Interestingly enough, Tolkien had the explicit intention of creating a mythology (*Letters* 144), and in doing so, made use of elements from old mythological traditions such as the Celtic, Finnish and Norse ones (Fimi 51; Tolkien, *Letters* 144, 176).

<sup>2</sup> The highly influential fictional universe of *Star Wars* has spread from cinema to all forms of entertainment media, and is sustained by a rich mythology, which was heavily influenced by analyses of mythological structures such as the one presented by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) (Deyneka 31-46).

topic, I must first address the matter of myth in popular fiction in general, since there are many entangled reasons for both myth and folklore to be influential in fantasy, science-fiction, and horror. Besides *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*, in the last decades many other entertainment franchises, whether in literature, cinema, television, comic books or video games, have similarly produced fictional worlds, characters and narratives that present the characteristics of myth. Even when there is an attempt at consciously deviating from common mythological tropes towards a more realistic, raw approach as exemplified by George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-2011), these fictional worlds still retain their mythological character and create their own.

The word “mythology” may, of course, remit to the stories of Greek, Norse, Egyptian, Chinese or any other of the world's great mythologies, which were once the basis for religious beliefs, and that is not without reason for the sets of narratives which compose these mythological traditions provide meaning to our understanding of what a mythology consists of; in addition, they retain an influential role as an inspiration for modern fiction. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding the relevance of this association, the scope of the word “mythology” goes beyond these examples. There seems to be a particular function of mythological narratives and their elements that is important to cultural expression, which manifests throughout several forms of art in accordance with the context of a society and its different forms of storytelling. An example is the current use of myth in popular media but similar instances of myths' ability to adapt, from oral traditions to written traditions, from sacred narratives to entertainment, may be identified. Mircea Eliade provides a pertinent example by underlining how myth adapted to other forms of conveying storytelling as is the case with modern novels:

What we consider important is the fact that in modern societies the prose narrative, especially the novel, has taken the place of the recitation of myths in traditional and popular societies. More than this – it is possible to dissect out the “mythical” structure of certain modern novels, in other words, to show the literary survival of great mythological themes and characters. (191)

Eliade further adds that even in modern depictions of heroism and supernatural strength, as in the case of contemporary superheroes, myth retains its presence and function by remarking that “[t]he characters of the comic strips present the modern version of mythological or folklore Heroes. They incarnate the ideal of a large part of society, to such a degree that any change in their typical conduct or, still worse, their death, will bring on veritable crisis among their readers” (Eliade 185). Eliade's quote

brings up a detail that leads me to the main topic of this article: “mythological or folklore Heroes”, emphasis on “folklore”. There is a particular expression of traits associated with myth which is specific to folklore. The term “folklore” is related to several aspects of a given culture, which may include aesthetic styles related to material culture but also customs, traditions, beliefs, songs, celebrations and, most importantly, oral traditions of narrative material in the form of folktales and legends. Folktales reflect the culture of a given people, embodying superstitions, beliefs and the relationship with the landscape. Yet, the resulting narratives, more often than not, are filled with supernatural and fantastic elements and are frequently set in the region, village or town where such narratives are transmitted, or at least present a clear reflection of the landscape and cultural references of said community. Due to their nature, folktales are usually characteristic of rural areas, where there is a more favourable atmosphere in terms of cultural isolation and conservatism for old narrative traditions and beliefs to thrive. Tales of witches, fairies, the devil, vampires, spirits, ghosts, werewolves, goblins, or other monsters and odd creatures, as well as what Eliade calls “folklore heroes,” are thus often the product of rural folklore, but why is there an association with “mythology” as well?

The relationship between myths and folktales was a motive for debate for many years, and this discussion led to theories pointing out the differences between the two forms of narrative<sup>3</sup> but also to the acknowledgment that myths and folktales cannot be perfectly differentiated and are, in fact, interchangeable in accordance with context:

In passing from one society to another through diffusion, a myth or legend may be accepted without being believed, thus becoming a folktale in the borrowing society; and the reverse may also happen. It is entirely possible that the same tale type may be a folktale in one society, a legend in a second society, and a myth in the third. (Bascom 7)

John Stephens provides an explanation to Bascom’s affirmation by underlining that the narrative material of many folktales does result from old mythologies:

[...] ever since the Grimm brothers proposed that *Marchen*, or folk tales, were vestiges of ancient myths, the thought has persisted that these tales often preserve in their story structures elements of an older, intuitively figurative vision of being and existence, and have an innate cultural value for that reason.

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<sup>3</sup> Bascom and Minard differentiated myth from folktale by considering that in any given society myth is a sacred narrative with a cosmogonic function considered to be true (Bascom 4), while folktales are not sacred, are seen as fictional, and their purpose is entertainment (Minard 349).

(Stephens 332)

An example can be found in Celtic mythology, specifically in the *Aes Sidhe*, the fairies of Irish folklore, which are a folk incarnation of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, the gods from Irish mythology: “Thus, for example, the Tuath Dé of Legendary History and the Mythological Cycle of early Irish literature are for the most part susceptible to interpretation as mythological beings or even pre-Christian gods, though clearly forming a continuum with the fairies of modern Irish folk belief” (Minard 728). Having acknowledged these factors, it may be more adequate to see this narrative material as another manifestation of myth, despite its particular characteristics: “Many traditional oral tales [...] tend not to assume practical or emotional and intellectual applications; they are what we term folktales or *Märchen*. It is sensible not to deny these the general title of ‘myths’, since their themes interact with those of more imaginative and pregnant types” (Kirk 58).

Having started the discussion regarding the role of myth, one may wonder what the relevance of folklore on this matter is. While its original context may have been (and still is) the “ritual” of storytelling around the fireplace in traditional villages in the countryside, folktales have also managed to be present in the imagination of a larger audience, with a conspicuous example being the popularity of Walt Disney’s re-imaginings of fairy tales in animated movies. Additionally, many popular media franchises re-utilize elements not only from old mythologies but also from folklore; this is even the case with Tolkien’s creations.<sup>4</sup>

### The Folk Horror Genre

There is a genre found in popular media in recent years that perfectly showcases how folklore has managed to find its way into “modern” mythologies, that is, folk horror, in both cinema and television. The genre has its roots in literature<sup>5</sup>, but it gained prominence with a trilogy of films in the late sixties and seventies, aptly named “The

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<sup>4</sup> Tolkien was also acquainted with narrative materials from folklore besides old mythologies. His concept of *Faërie*, his own view of the Celtic Otherworld, as explained in his essay “On Fairy-stories” results from both mythological influences and folkloristic ones, which were both applied to the creation of his Middle-Earth (Spangenberg 186).

<sup>5</sup> The literary work of M. R. James (1862-1936) has been analysed by Darryl Jones (55-64) due to the presence of many of the traits of the folk horror genre in James’ narratives such as *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1904). Likewise, Alan G. Smith finds similar traits (77-86) in the work of Thomas Hardy (1840-1928). There are earlier precursors of the genre though, which according to Christopher Flavin can be traced back to medieval literature (9-19).

Unholy Trinity” and comprised of Michael Reeves’ *The Witchfinder General* (1968), Piers Haggard’s *Blood on Satan’s Claw* (1971), and Robin Hardy’s *The Wicker Man* (1973). These films earned a cult following, and the genre has seen a revival in the last decade, which continues up until today. The question may arise of why folklore and horror are associated together<sup>6</sup>, for horror is not what comes to mind if one’s notion of folktales is tied with the Disney version of fairy tales; in truth, many folktales have a darker quality to them than Disney’s animated movies lead audiences to believe. Folktales are a result of not only reminiscences of old beliefs, rituals and mythologies, but they also reflect the relationship of people with the landscape around them, which is tinged not by rational and scientific thought, but by superstition and awe driven by the mysteries of the wilderness, finding more expression in rural and agrarian geographies:

The isolation, the unnaturalness of the environment, and the erasure of any possible distancing between the civilised and the supernatural effects an environment in which the world itself is shown to be hostile and chthonic – a self-generating chaos infused with the supernatural and overlaid with a veneer of normalcy. (Flavin 11)

These tales, transmitted from generation to generation, often at night, when families gathered around fireplaces, frequently deal with supernatural creatures and scary, mysterious events, hidden in the dark corners of forests, mountains or any other natural landscape. They are a combination of the archetype of the monster with superstitions and humanity’s relationship with the environment. When commenting on the demonic lore in rural Britain, Brendan Walsh illustrates this idea:

The landscape and isolated nature of these villages – surrounded by dense forests, flanked by steaming moors, or nestled between rugged hillsides – created the ideal atmosphere for the manifestation of demonic phenomena. This enchanted setting, positioned at the periphery of modernity, thus provides the ideal thematic and historical context for Folk Horror [...]. (21)

The conjunction of this cultural context results in the manifestation of a haunting quality that endows this type of narrative, along with what in scholarly discourse has been aptly named the *eerie* by Mark Fisher – a concept about something “which lies beyond

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<sup>6</sup> In *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (2017), Adam Scovell has produced a work attempting to define folk horror through his concept of ‘folk horror chain’ which has become a reference in the study of folk horror. However, his analysis focuses on the original trilogy of folk horror films and may not apply to all films in this genre.

standard perception, cognition and experience” (12) and “clings to certain kinds of physical spaces and landscapes” (61), which is no doubt reflected in folk horror. The setting of *Blood on Satan’s Claw*, for example, is a rural village in eighteenth-century England, providing an atmosphere susceptible for a rural closed community to be harassed by demonic influences. The *Wicker Man*, likewise, concerns a rural community on the isolated island of Summerisle, and the practice of pagan rituals that culminate in human sacrifice. More recent examples can be found. Robert Eggers’ *The Witch* (2015) depicts a family of Puritan settlers in New England who establish a little farm in a secluded forest and become the prey of occult forces. This begins to dismantle the familiar cohesion and eventually leads to the death of several family members. This latter example illustrates quite well the psychological relationship between Man and the landscape characteristic of a rural setting, for even the audience may wonder until the end whether there are indeed supernatural forces at play or if the tragic events progressively unfolding result from a descent into superstitious paranoia.

Some folk horror films are more focused on communities that have inherited old pagan customs and rituals, some of which are abhorrent and horrific by today’s standards. These films, such as *The Wicker Man* from the original trinity of folk horror films, or most recently Ari Aster’s *Midsommar* (2019), allude to old myths and rituals by suggesting that folklore hides reminiscences of old ritualistic pagan traditions<sup>7</sup>. Other folk horror films, while maintaining elements common to the genre, attempt to portray the supernatural itself which is characteristic of many folktales; this is the case of *Blood on Satan’s Claw*, or *The Witch*, with the latter being quite faithful to the atmosphere, details and elements around folktales focused on witches and the devil. This type of folk horror provides a direct representation of what constitutes the mythic nature of folktales, particularly when they feature figures from old myths or some connection with the latter. Indeed, many folk horror films and television series focus on the relationship between folklore and old mythologies, like David Bruckner’s *The Ritual* (2017), Corin Hardy’s *The Hallow* (2015), Gareth Evans’ *The Apostle* (2018) or Mathieu Missoffe’s series *Zone Blanche* (2017-2019). This connection does derive from the notion that folklore has

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<sup>7</sup> There are several factors for such notion and to why it is pervasive to folk horror movies. Many ethnographic studies of rural communities demonstrate that many customs, traditions, beliefs and celebrations in popular folklore do retain reminiscences of pre-Christian beliefs and rituals. A pertinent example may be given by Máire Macneill’s work in *The Festival of Lughnasa* (1962), where she analyses traditions associated with the summer festival of Lughnasa in Ireland and verifies their connection with pre-Christian Celtic myth and ritual. Another factor is the influence of the association of myth and ritual in early twentieth-century influential works such as Frazer’s *Golden Bough* (1890).

elements that arise from the past and are expressed in folk horror: “These key elements of Folk Horror – the continuation of the past in the present and alternative belief systems – often mean that the religious and supernatural landscapes depicted within them refer back to earlier pagan religions and deities. Thus, these gods of Folk Horror are the old gods” (Soar 32).

### **The Role of Streaming in Shaping Modern Fiction**

Many of the examples mentioned are available in today’s streaming services and were outright produced to be directly available through streaming, which leads us to another topic. Streaming allows immediate access to a multitude of films or television series, which may affect the criteria used for storytelling and the form of the narratives since there is a further need to create relevance amongst a vast selection of options available at the touch of a button. Media produced specifically for a streaming platform takes this context into account because there is a further need to retain the audience’s attention. Nonetheless, even in such a competitive environment, fantasy and science-fiction series remain popular, with every platform providing multiple options from this genre in their media library. Whether it is another adaptation of Tolkien’s mythological Middle-Earth in Amazon Prime’s *The Rings of Power* (2022 -), HBO Max’s prequel series to *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) in the form of *House of the Dragon* (2022-), or Disney’s several *Star Wars* and Marvel’s superheroes shows, there is a wide selection of media in streaming platforms that provide modern mythological narratives.

Perhaps not surprisingly, folk horror also found its way into streaming platforms: “Perhaps as a sign of both the current growth and popularity of folk horror cinema, contemporary streaming services have either funded the production of these films or created a genre category to allocate their existing content within” (Rose 76). Like most popular franchises regarding the wider spectrum of fantasy, superhero or science-fiction genres, it seems that folk horror retains its relevance in streaming media. Even though it represents more of a niche genre, it has managed to gather the interest of audiences even in an overpopulated catalogue of other movies and series. Netflix, for instance, has been investing in the genre, attesting the audience’s interest (Rose 76). In fact, some of the aforementioned folk horror examples, like *The Ritual*, *The Apostle*, or *Zone Blanche*, are published or produced by Netflix.

## The Perennial Relevance of Folk Horror's Myths

The most important question regarding our inquiry is concerned with understanding why a genre that uses elements and narrative material, if not directly, at least inspired by folklore, manages to somehow attract the attention of audiences, even in the context of streaming media. What is there in this form of fiction that sparks such interest? This question is tied with the very same question regarding narratives that have a mythological structure or elements, whether they constitute a new modern mythological world or are inspired by old mythologies. The fact that such a question applies to the more general term “myth” is a testimony to how the elements from folk and fairy tales or legends are themselves particular manifestations of myth within a certain context and with specific characteristics. A possible answer is related to the idea of perennial relevance in myths and, in correlation with it, myth adaptability. Myth is very difficult to categorize, but it has some identifiable properties that allow easy recognition. Even if one is not aware of the concepts of “myth” or “folktale”, there is a notion that some elements characterize a specific form of narrative. For anthropologists such as Lévi-Strauss, myth is a form of language:

Whatever our ignorance of the language and the culture of the people where it originated, a myth is still felt as a myth by any reader anywhere in the world. Its substance does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the *story* which it tells. Myth is language, functioning on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at “taking off” from the linguistic ground on which it keeps on rolling. (210)

Such a language is hard to decode, and it may be attributed to Jungian archetypes (Jung 67-103), or follow Malinowski's consideration that myth “expresses, enhances, and codifies belief” (126) among many other perspectives.<sup>8</sup> Whatever the case, it is possible to recognize that the language of myth can convey societal and psychological traits, reflections of the experience of a community in what concerns their society or the elements of Nature around them as well as perceptions and notions common to the human experience. This language does this by placing such aspects in a supernatural world where the landscape may be inhabited by fantastical and supernatural creatures, all of which cannot be found in the real world unless one looks at it with the power of imagination.

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<sup>8</sup> The reference to Malinowski, or most specifically to the matter of belief, is in the general sense of the word, not necessarily religious or spiritual (although it can be so), but also related to innate or personal beliefs, superstitions, societal beliefs, or common beliefs generated in the human mind, even if they are beyond the scope of scientific reasoning or are plain irrational or emotional.



The same can be said about folklore, and this trait can be observed in folk horror as well. In *The Hallow*, a couple and their baby son move into a secluded house in the woods close to a rural area in Ireland. They are soon warned that the forest is inhabited by a breed of fairies<sup>9</sup>, portrayed as deformed creatures who exchange human children with changelings<sup>10</sup>. As the film explicitly demonstrates, these supernatural creatures are intrinsically connected to the forest, they are a part of that landscape and exist within it. Examples from streaming media such as Netflix also demonstrate a similar portrayal of the supernatural. *The Apostle* features a pagan Goddess captured by a religious cult on a remote Welsh island, and it is later revealed in the film that this supernatural entity is, in fact, a personification of the island itself, its land, vegetation and life. The series *Zone Blanche* is focused on a village surrounded by an extensive forest, where murders and strange events take place, and the atmosphere throughout the entire series is marked by the ominous presence of a horned supernatural creature who wanders through the woods. Both the plot and the use of scenes where the horned entity appears in the context of bizarre occurrences create the subliminal idea that this creature exerts a supernatural influence over everything that happens. The village itself and its inhabitants are portrayed with characteristics common to a rural town, but in that very same setting, there is also a supernatural presence that is a part of that community's reality. These mythological (ir)realities are not completely surreal, they possess enough mimetic properties concerning the real world to allow the individual to establish a connection between reality and myth. In fact, they call to (and are created by) the imaginative perception of a particular society, landscape or universal commonplaces that are transversal to the contact of Mankind with the world it inhabits. A rather pertinent view is to understand such language as resulting from a form of symbolism which originates and is characteristic of a given society:

[...] a community – a given culture – comes into being through a system of mutual recognition, an implicit symbolic pact by which a social order and an order of the world are instituted. What secures the strength of this pact, and the stability of the social ties it creates, is that this symbolic order is 'effective', in the sense defined in what precedes. It draws us into its networks and its processes; this is its function and without it there would be no community and no society in general. This is why it operates neither at the level of conscious will, nor even that of unconscious affects, but at the level of those instruments

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<sup>9</sup> A particular portrayal of the aforementioned *Aes Sidhe*, although called "The Hallow" in the film.

<sup>10</sup> Changelings are one of the characteristics associated with fairies in Irish folklore: the kidnapping of human children and exchange by an otherworldly fairy child (with this creature being the changeling).

of figuration – symbols – which, at the same time as they are articulated to one another, bind us together. They ensure that affects constitute effective devices. This is also why symbolisms (and some symbols more than others) have a long memory; our cultures remember them beyond changes of time and place. (Hénaff 193)

This is the point that can help understand the ideas of perennial relevance in what concerns myth. The mythological “language” discussed here is able to maintain relevant and recognizable aspects through a selection of symbolic elements that remain relevant in a given society, or through changes in the symbolism of a particular mythological element or narrative, although there seems to be a core, transversal structure that remains. This is particularly visible in “traditional” myths, which is an acknowledgment quite pertinent when discussing folklore:

The basic idea of the myth as a traditional tale has its own important implication, which tends to be concealed if the definition is elaborated. Whatever the particular kinds and uses of such tales, their traditional quality and their narrative force cannot be infringed. In other words, in order to become traditional and remain so, a tale must have an appeal that continues from generation to generation (although perhaps with slight alteration of emphasis): either simply as a tale, because it is particularly neat and forceful (and so on), or as a tale with a special application or set of applications – as explanatory, problem-palliating, confirmatory, psychologically liberating and so on. If the applications are varied somehow from generation to generation, or in the passage of a myth from one society into another; then its narrative core or plot must be such as to allow different emphases and interpretations according to different customs, needs and preoccupations. In one sense, a myth is always changing; in another, its narrative structure persists. (Kirk 58)

In the case of folktales and legends that provide material for the folk horror genre, an immediate element transversal to folk horror films is the monster. Both *Blood on Satan's Claw* and *The Witch* feature the devil himself as the main cause for the unfolding of terrible events, as well as witches in the case of the latter. The aforementioned monstrous fairies in *The Hallow* eventually attack the protagonists and are at the centre of the film's plot development. In productions provided by Netflix, similar monstrous identities are the antagonists. In *The Ritual*, a group of four friends go on a hiking trip to the Swedish forests. Horror soon starts to unfold among the group when they are attacked by a cult that worships a supernatural hideous monster, the latter being revealed as the true villain. Indeed, it cannot be said that monsters have not maintained their relevance in popular fiction, especially supernatural monsters, as the ones from folklore, since “[t]he

primary function of a fictional monster is to be salient. It can fulfil that function by being dangerous because humans are hard-wired to pay attention to dangerous agents, but the monster becomes even more interesting by being unnatural” (Clasen 224). A possible motive for this interest may be related, according to Mathias Clasen, to biological evolution and consequently with a trait of our psychology:

Horror monsters are usually supercharged predators with counterintuitive traits, well designed to capture and hold our attention. They are tailored to have a specific effect on the human mind, and the reason they succeed is that there are regularities in human cognitive architecture that make sense only in the light of our evolutionary history. (224)

Clasen also adds that these fictional monsters are shaped according to their cultural origin, which would explain the variety of supernatural creatures in different folklore and myths, each maintaining their cultural relevance due to the particular fear they incite in humans (225-228). Nevertheless, while it is an important element, the archetype of the monster is present in a variety of narratives, and it is not enough to determine why folk horror narratives are able to maintain their relevance.

However, there is another theme that recurrently appears and may be another perennial element in these narratives that has withstood time and remained relevant and may hold a deeper meaning. Many of these tales are concerned with an outsider who often hails from the urban “civilized” world but, for some reason, visits the rural countryside and gets entangled either with ancient customs or primeval supernatural forces. The starting point for *The Wicker Man*, for instance, is the journey of Police Sergeant Neil Howie to the remote island of Summersville to investigate the disappearance of a girl, where he encounters a pagan cult that practices an ancient form of Celtic human sacrifice. *Midsommar* likewise sees protagonist Dani, an American student, travelling to Sweden to participate in midsummer festivities with a community of cultists who also end up practising ancient rituals of human sacrifice. In examples from streaming media, the same trope is recurrent. As mentioned, *The Ritual* narrates the travel of four friends from the city to the Swedish forest, where they encounter a supernatural creature who dominates the woods. Similarly, in *The Apostle*, the protagonist, Thomas Richardson, journeys to an isolated island to rescue his kidnapped sister and clashes with a cult that possesses an imprisoned supernatural entity. In a similar fashion, *Zone Blanche*’s narrative also begins with the journey of prosecutor Franck Siriani to the rural village of Villefranche to

investigate why it has a high murder rate<sup>11</sup>, and becomes entangled in the town's happenings that are related to the horned creature in the woods. This theme may symbolize the encounter, conflict and incompatibility between wild natural forces and "civilization" and has been the driving force underlying symbolism of many narratives, going back as far as medieval literature, with a paradigmatic example being *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.<sup>12</sup> The rural landscape and society are closer to ancient raw forces, and folktales and their supernatural elements provide avatars to depict them. The result is a sentiment of the present "civilized" urban life "haunted" by the pagan savagery of the past:

The variances from the declared moral values of the majority, such as the tensions between modern law and the naturalised pagan social law of Summerisle, or the laws of worshipping the old gods in *Midsommar*, culminate in the event-driven interactions of modern Folk Horror, which seem first to be random before being shown as being carefully culled, and ground these concepts as defining elements of the genre. [...] The haunting of the present by the forgotten or repressed past, as Jaco Gericke illustrates, depends on both the interdependence of the present and the past as a means to define themselves and the present's unwillingness to see those relationships even as the past continues to exist as a haunted version of the present. [...] The haunting spectre of the past, here, is one that is deeply embedded in the nature of the landscape itself as the perceived modern attempts to reconcile itself to its own nature and the past it is both fascinated and repelled by. (Flavin 10)

The connection of this pagan past with mythological elements is encased in concepts such as the Celtic Otherworld<sup>13</sup>, which, despite hailing from Celtic mythology, finds analogues in other mythologies and expressions of folklore from other cultures, with

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<sup>11</sup> However, it can be argued that the main protagonist of the series is the town's Police detective Laurène Weiss.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Flavin establishes a parallel between Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a chivalric romance written at the end of the fourteenth century, and the protagonists of folk horror films. In the same manner that Gawain leaves the medieval courtly atmosphere of Camelot in search of the Green Chapel and the Green Knight, both embodiments of the Celtic Otherworld and the pre-Christian "savage" past, so too most protagonists in folk horror travel to rural and isolated areas where pagan cults and supernatural monsters connected with ancient myths await them (Flavin 9-15).

<sup>13</sup> The Otherworld is a supernatural liminal plane of existence from Celtic mythology that coexists in parallel with the world of mortals. It is frequently described in early Irish Literature as the realm of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, the Celtic deities. The concept survived in Irish folklore, where the Otherworld is inhabited by the *Aes Sidhe*, also called the Irish fairies, although there is also an association of the Otherworld with the realm of the dead and everything that might be supernatural. It is a dimension where there is no death, sickness or ageing, and where the passage of time is different (a mortal that visits it may find that centuries have passed upon his return to the mortal realm). The entrances to the Otherworld are usually associated with distinct features visible on the landscape or specific locations, such as mounds or specific hills, ancient megalithic monuments, mushroom circles, forest clearings or islands overseas. Additionally, the frontiers with the Otherworld seem to open at specific times of the year corresponding to two of the four great Irish seasonal festivals, namely *Samhain* and *Beltane*, considered liminal times (Carey 1403-1406).

similar notions being recognisable in several folk horror narratives, including examples found in Netflix streaming service. In the aforementioned *Zone Blanche*, it is revealed that the horned creature is the manifestation of the Celtic God Cernunnos, an entity which in Celtic Mythology is otherworldly by definition, and this is expressed in the liminality that endows the encounters of protagonist Laurene with Cernunnos, and the time and memory lapses that these encounters provoke on the former. Cernunnos is an ancient entity that is implied to be as old as the forest itself, or even a part of it, and who establishes a bridge to the primordial past, demonstrated by flashbacks in the series where Cernunnos interacts with Roman legionaries. Likewise, in *The Ritual*, although this time in connection with Germanic/Scandinavian mythology, the supernatural monster is revealed to be an offspring of the Norse God Loki, the reminiscence of an otherworldly connection with the Asgardian realm of the Gods, who nevertheless is able to manifest in the dense Swedish forest and provides a bridge to an ancient mythological and primordial world in that particular uncivilized setting.

The Otherworld is a complex concept that expresses the mythic mind of man, who sees it as the embodiment of the relationship with nature and the unknown, paved by the supernatural, and was able to keep its relevance by being a manifestation of man's own fears, too ingrained and too natural to fade from our conscience (Flavin 18). As Flavin remarks regarding medieval texts, "[t]he chivalric world of the court can never again fully forget the reality of the pagan, Celtic past which has thrust itself on them" (Flavin 15). The same could be said of all of us, and perhaps the origin of this idea goes back to when Man first had contact with the world, which was then manifested in mythology and found its way into folklore, even long after such mythologies lost their cultural importance, remaining, however, relevant even in modern day life. Hence perhaps why, even amid a large quantity of other media available in modern streaming services, there are still narratives such as the ones in *The Ritual*, *The Apostle*, or *Zone Blanche*, which express these mythic concepts.



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## REVIEWS





Photo: Elisa Azevedo

**REVIEW | Nae, Andrei. *Immersion, Narrative, and Gender Crisis in Survival Horror Videogames*. Routledge, 2022.**

Alexis F. Viegas

Game Studies is a recent and rapidly developing field. The strict divisions between Narratology and Ludology that defined its inception (Aarseth 1997) have been reconsidered in light of more comparative approaches, as initially suggested by Janet H. Murray in *Hamlet on The Holodeck* (1997). The Routledge series “Advances in Game Studies” reflects this evolution with its latest additions (Ewan, 2021; Green, 2021; Mortensen and Jørgensen, 2020), of which *Immersion, Narrative, and Gender Crisis in Survival Horror Videogames* (2022), by Andrei Nae, is a notable mention.

The book is divided into three parts and is comprised of ten chapters in total. The main thesis is developed around the connection between representations of gender identity and video game genres – a tension between *gender* and *genre* that is explored through the categories of action and survival horror. The focus of this argumentation lies in the centrality of gameplay mechanics as producers of meaning, bridging between Game

and Cultural Studies methodology. Researchers may find the framework quite accessible, since the author presents the theorization with clear and concise wording. Furthermore, Nae features a conclusion section to each chapter that further simplifies approaching the corpus presented.

The first part of the book is composed of two chapters that problematize not only the constant presence of cisgender, male, and white avatars in this category, but also the role of immersion in the naturalization of certain masculine performances. The first chapter functions as a comprehensible look into key concepts for the book – immersion, narrativity, and identity/identification – where Nae critically surveys gender representations and performances within the action genre. Despite the quality already found in this chapter, the second one is the most noteworthy of the two: “The gender politics of immersion”. Nae presents a theory influenced by their academic background in Cultural Studies, positioning the player as a performer of gender. This approach is not necessarily innovative in nature, nor is the connection between performance, identity, and video games.<sup>1</sup> Nae’s innovation does not lie in framing Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity in the context of Game Studies either.<sup>2</sup> The author’s theorization shines anew in how it expands upon previous works in the field by epistemologically connecting Butler’s concepts with Ian Bogost’s (2007) procedural theory. Thus, the mechanical and narrative elements become producers of gender/genre, inasmuch as they are simultaneously tools for both the production and expression of gender identity and typological categories. According to Nae, components of video game design that define these genres are also constructing, to some extent, representations of identities – or at least *ideas* about them. In fact, the chapter demonstrates how hypermasculinity is deeply rooted in the action category, and immersion contributes to the naturalization of this hyperbolized masculine performance:

The unnaturalness of these procedural figures of white masculinity would normally raise awareness with respect to the artificiality of the simulation [...]. However, with the help of the means of immersion [...], games manage to naturalize these procedural figures and the ideology inscribed within the process of simulating white masculinity. (Nae 37)

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, works such as *Performativity in Art, Literature, and Videogames* (Jayemanne 2017) and *Masculinities in Play* (Taylor and Voorhees 2018) have already explored these concepts in detail.

<sup>2</sup> Jacqueline Marie Povin had already proposed such an approach in “Cyborgs and Consoles: Gender Performativity and the Liberatory Potential of Video Games” (2019).

The second part of the work features four chapters focused on classic survival horror, featuring some of the most emblematic titles of the era. Each chapter is dedicated to analysing a different game, regarding political and identity implications of their representational mechanics. For the sake of brevity, I will highlight the two chapters I found particularly thought-provoking: “Welcome to the survival horror: The deconstruction of gender in *Resident Evil*” and “The verisimilar representation and simulation of masculinity in crisis in *Silent Hill 2*”. The latter touches on the deconstruction of hypermasculinity, but more so on the potentialities of gameplay narrativization. In this regard, Nae states that both the narrative structure and the gameplay loop of *Silent Hill 2* have “a strong bearing on how gender is represented and simulated”, because instead of “flaunting the artificiality of hypermasculinity, the game offers a verisimilar alternative to it” (92). Nonetheless, the highlight of the chapter is something Nae only briefly mentions, but that I found quite relevant for any proper analysis of *Silent Hill 2* – the role of the ‘abject’, as understood by Julia Kristeva, in the characterization of its *gendered* monsters. The abject nature of these representations is notorious, and the same reason why many players have found their designs equal amounts of alluring and disturbing; but it also speaks of a wider issue of feminine representation across media – feminine bodies as sites of both repulsion and desire.

The former chapter, on the other hand, establishes the roots of survival horror and its defining characteristics, followed by how *Resident Evil* utilizes these same features to subvert aesthetic, mechanical, and narrative expectations associated with action games. While genre definitions in gaming may often prove to be troublesome (Vargas-Iglesias, 2018), Nae’s approach to classic survival horror is very well structured with every element properly identified and supported in their argumentation. I believe it is a critical resource for those researching, developing, or writing about horror in video games. However, the most relevant aspect of Nae’s analysis here focuses on gameplay as a producer of meaning, which, in this case, is used to deconstruct both gender and genre representations. Nae states this process of deconstruction provokes a destabilizing effect that, when combined with the narrative, creates a constant crisis in the simulation of hypermasculinity. While the action genre usually features virtually invulnerable male characters, survival horror subjects players to a role permeated with vulnerability and constant renegotiation of expectations surrounding masculinity, by virtue of its own gameplay mechanics.

In the third and final part, the previous structure is revisited for post-classic survival horror. The author explores how certain titles navigate between mechanics inherited from both action games and classic survival horror, as well as the resulting implications of such a negotiation on the representation of gender identity. I would like to draw particular attention to its final chapter, “Marginalization and intersectionality in *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice*”. Nae demonstrates how the symbiotic dynamic between gameplay and narrative in *Hellblade* draws upon characteristics of classic survival horror to critique two things: firstly, representations of female mental health, and secondly, the simulation of hypermasculine performance in video games. The articulation between gameplay and symptoms of psychosis is quite notable in the game; and the author frames its importance clearly for the discussion at hand, ultimately stating that *Hellblade* “can be regarded as an example of how action games can maintain ludic and narrative engagement, while at the same time addressing political issues pertaining to video games themselves and society at large” (210).

In sum, *Immersion, Narrative, and Gender Crisis in Survival Horror Videogames* is a comparativist work, drawing on theories and concepts from both Cultural and Game Studies, where elements of video game design are placed front and centre as producers of meaning – a meaning which may be enhanced or complemented by the narrative. Nae’s analysis adds to this notion through survival horror, but the scope of its contribution is not limited to it. It also brings the lines of research in Narratology and Ludology closer and offers a reflection on political and identity-related issues rooted in the most fundamental characteristic of the medium – gameplay – in a scholarly pursuit that is exquisite in its main thesis and the quality of its writing.



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Photo: Elisa Azevedo

**REVIEW | *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* (Amazon Prime, 2022–): The use of Tolkien’s invented languages**

Mareike Huber

In 2010, George R. R. Martin wrote on his blog that methods which work in novels, such as noting that characters “were speaking Dothraki”, cannot be applied to audio- and audiovisual types of media, “where you actually [sic] have to HEAR what the characters are saying” (n.pg.). This conundrum also applies to adaptations of J. R. R. Tolkien’s texts, such as Amazon’s *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* (2022 –). The show is set in Arda, the world that Tolkien created and in which his novels take place, during the Second Age before the Fall of Númenor and the War of the Last Alliance. I will not talk about the show apart from its linguistic elements, as plenty of commentary, especially as pertains to comparisons between *Rings of Power* and what Tolkien himself has written (for example Holly n.pg.), can be found elsewhere.

From a strictly linguistic point of view, *Rings of Power* is a very ambitious project. In an interview, two of the show's executive producers, Lindsey Weber and Patrick McKay, said that they hired a "group of [...] Tolkien experts" for consultation (McKay & Weber Interview 0:16) and one of them was Carl Hostetter, who is the head of the Elvish Linguistic Society. The show features at least four different languages: The Elvish tongues Sindarin ("Udûn" 42:48) and Quenya ("A Shadow of the Past" [ASotP] 05:33), which are the most developed of Tolkien's languages, the Black Speech ("The Great Wave" [TGW] 16:15), and the Dwarves' secret language, Khuzdul ("Adrift" 16:37). In addition, writings of all kinds are shown, especially *Tengwar* and *Cirth*, both of which are found in Tolkien's novels. However, there are also original writing systems such as the symbols used by the Harfoots (ASotP 19:44), a script for the Black Speech ("Adar" 36:16), the scratchings of the Stranger ("Adrift" 25:19), and Númenorean letters ("The Great Wave" [TGW] 1:05:40).

Far from being limited to a handful of words, background chatter ("Adrift" 16:37) or the soundtrack, the languages are utilised extensively throughout the show's eight episodes. In conversation with each other, the Elves frequently speak Quenya for a couple of lines before switching to English (ASotP 24:27). Notably, this happens not only among the Ñoldor or High Elves, but also between different Elven kindreds ("Adar" 26:15). This stands in conflict to Appendix F:I of *The Lord of the Rings* which states that Quenya had become a language of "ceremony, and for high matters of lore and song" (Tolkien, *Lord* 1101). In *The Silmarillion*, it is said that in dealings with the Sindar and Silvan Elves, the Ñoldor adopted Sindarin and that Thingol, the first king of the Sindar, forbade the use of Quenya in his realm (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 149). This language ban happened in the First Age, while the events of *The Rings of Power* take place in the Second Age. Thus, while it makes sense for the Ñoldor to speak Quenya amongst themselves, it is odd that the other Elves should also speak it. In comparison, Sindarin, which should be the tongue used by the Elves in this time period, is spoken only twice and then not among the Elves, but to horses ("Udûn" 42:48, 59:58). This criticism cannot be extended, however, to Elendil's use of Quenya, with which he demonstrates to Galadriel that she is "not hated by all" the Númenoreans ("Adar" 28:14). This is in accordance with the appendices, which say that scholars and royals among the Númenoreans "learned also the High-elven Quenya" (Tolkien, *Lord* 1102). Many names, especially those of "men of royalty and great renown" (ibid.) like 'Elendil' are actually in Quenya, a point that is picked up by the show in its third episode when Queen Míriel questions Elendil about the meaning of



his name because its second possible translation, “Elf-friend” (“Adar” 19:43) is seen by her as a cause for suspicion about Elendil’s loyalty to Númenor (19:37).

There are other examples of languages playing a role in the plot of the TV show. Without knowledge of the “Rite of Sigin-tarâg”<sup>1</sup> (“Adrift” 16:27), Elrond would not have been allowed to enter Khazad-dûm (16:31). Arondir and Revion wonder in the third episode why the leader of the Orcs is called “Adar”, which is an Elvish word meaning ‘father’ (TGW 17:32). This serves as foreshadowing of the fact that ‘Adar’ likely is, or at least used to be, an Elf who was taken and corrupted by the first Dark Lord, Morgoth (“Udûn” 46:14). The symbol after which Galadriel hunts in the first episode returns in episode 3 as part of the Black Speech text that she reads in Númenor (36:16). At least initially, the mysterious Stranger only speaks a language subtitled as “other” (“Adrift” 24:42), even though it is likely Quenya (“Partings” 29:12, “The Eye” 9:42) but learns, over the course of the show, the language spoken by the Harfoots<sup>2</sup> (“Partings” 03:02). Curiously, when the Mystics, three figures in white who hunt after the Stranger, finally find him, the first thing they say to him is in Quenya even though they think he is Sauron (“Alloyed” 3:47). That the Black Speech had already been invented by Sauron and was used by his servants is evidenced by the fact that the Orcs and Adar use it throughout the show, so why do the Mystics not address him in this language instead? A possible explanation may be found in the “veil” (21:09) that has been “placed upon [the Stranger’s] mind by those who cast [him] down” (21:13), which may also obscure his knowledge of the Black Speech. Of course, as is revealed in the last episode, the Stranger is not actually Sauron, but “*Istar*” (“Alloyed” 30:19), which he translates as “wise one” or “Wizard” (52:26).

Compared to Quenya and the Black Speech, Khuzdul and Sindarin, as already mentioned, feature a lot less. Khuzdul is largely relegated to background chatter (“Adrift” 17:45), the “Rite of Sigin-tarâg” (16:27), “Khazad-dûm” (18:31), the use of the term “Khazad” for Dwarves (“Partings” 30:15), the soundtrack (TGW 51:20), and two sentences (“The Eye” [TE] 11:48), the latter of which helps demonstrate that Elrond speaks Khuzdul. Interestingly, instead of calling the language by this name, Durin calls it “stone-tongue” (TE 11:57) and similarly, instead of using the Khuzdul name for the

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<sup>1</sup> *Sigin-tarâg* translates literally as “Longbeards” (Tolkien, *Peoples* 321), the name of the clan (297) to which the Dwarves of Khazad-dûm belong (304).

<sup>2</sup> Since this is represented by English in the show, I do not count it among my list of Tolkien’s languages in the TV series. A similar kind of translation convention is likely employed when members of different races and places speak ‘English’ with each other.

creator of Dwarves, Mahal (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 39), the Dwarves call him Aulë both to Elrond (“Adrift” 18:47) and among themselves (TE 13:31). Some of this, like the lack of Khuzdul, could be explained by the dearth of information in Tolkien’s own writings, especially as compared to Sindarin and Quenya, his most developed languages.

All in all, it is clear that much attention has been paid to the languages. They are not merely used for background dressing, as it were, but are an integral part of the show, just as they were an integral part in Tolkien’s creative process. That this was the case can be seen in one of his letters, in which he wrote that “[t]he invention of language [was] the foundation” for Middle-Earth (Tolkien Letter #319, in Carpenter 319). The creators of *Rings of Power* seem to be aware of this fact and turned to experts to help them integrate Tolkien’s “foundation” into their show, which for the most part and a few minor confusions aside, worked very well.



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