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(July 3-6, 2019)

Conference Report by Chiara Crosignani

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RELIGIONI FANTASTICHE E DOVE TROVARLE (JULY 3-6, 2019)

Conference Report by Chiara Crosignani

Religioni fantastiche e dove trovarle, Velletri, Museo delle Religioni "Raffaele Pettazoni", Italy, 3-6 July 2019.

The conference *Fantastic Religions and where to find them: Deities, myths and rites in Science Fiction and Fantasy (Religioni fantastiche e dove trovarle: Divinità, miti e riti nella fantascienza e nel Fantasy)* that took place in Velletri (near to Rome) focused on the presence of ancient and new religions in contemporary Fantasy and Science Fiction. Fantastika literature does not have a great tradition of study in Italy and one of the aims of the conference was the beginning of a new academic awareness of this field. Presenters included academics from a variety of disciplines and career levels, from independent researchers to graduate students and professors. One of the most interesting aspects of the conference was, indeed, that this approach to religious studies through Fantastika came from varying points of view: anthropological, sociological, psychological, and historical were the most represented. Such an approach was possible because this kind of studies has not yet to be codified and there was a lot of potential for new research. The conference provided an academic and a creative approach to the theme as the speakers were both scholars and Italian authors.

The main theme of the morning session of July 3rd was narrative prose. Davide Burgio (Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, Italy) analysed J. R. R. Tolkien's "Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth" (1993), a theological and philosophical discussion between an Elda and a human about eschatological hope and despair. The perspective on religion, here, had a strong connection with the salvation of pagans in the Middle Ages and provided interesting overtures on Tolkien's outlook despite the author's dislike of openly treating religious matter in his works. Nicola Martellozzo (Università di Torino, Italy) discussed Roger Zelazny's *Lord of Light* (1967), where the notions of divine, immortality, and religion are widely present, mostly the social aspects of religions and their effect on humans. In this novel, religion (and above all Hinduism and Buddhism) allows a small group of self-defined deities to take control over humanity, as guides or oppressors. According to Martellozzo, *Lord of Light* can be perceived as a reference to the thesis of Evemerus from Messina or to Karl Marx's theories on religion. Fernanda Rossini (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Italy) analysed Robert Heinlein's *Orphans in the Sky* (1941), set on a generational star-ship, whose builders, the Jordan Company, have become a god, a kind of *deus otiosus*, according to a part of the crew. The crew's religion allows Heinlein, through the main character Hugh, to reflect on faith and its social function. The last paper on the morning panel by Lucrezia Naglieri (Independent, Italy) focused on *The Handmaid's Tale*, both on the book (1985) and on the television (TV) series (2017-current). They argued that the use of biblical references by the Galaad institutions has a great impact on the iconographical elements, such as the use of colours to signify women's role in the society.

The afternoon session was dedicated to comics: Lottie Brown (University of Bristol, UK) explained the use of Greek and Roman mythology in the world building of *Wonder Woman* (1941-current). They demonstrated how the main character looks like a World War II veteran, with references to the Greek myth of the Amazons, but also to the Roman goddess Diana, in opposition to the Greek Goddess Artemis and her more warrior-like aspect. Roberta Matkovic (University of Pola, Croatia) presented on one of the most famous Italian comics, *Dylan Dog* (1986-current), and the varying ideas of hell that can be found in it: the traditional Christian hell, as it appears in the Middle Ages, but also hell as a public office, as an apparent Heaven where nothing happens, and life itself is a kind of hell. According to Matkovic, this representation of entities and places associated with evil offers a critique of moral values in contemporary Italian society. Marika Michelazzi (Independent, Italy), an Italian comics author, talked about how the act of creation can be mixed with history by analysing the gods of her last comics, *Chiantishire* (2017-current), and their roots in classic mythology. The following panel discussion, which included Michelazzi and three comics authors, Emiliano Mammucari (Independent, Italy), Matteo Mammucari (Independent, Italy) and Giovanni Masi (Independent, Italy), was focused on the problems of historical settings for Fantasy comics, above all about the differences between history and fiction.

The morning and afternoon sessions of July 4th were mostly dedicated to religions in Fantastika TV series and movies. Krzysztof Ulanowski (University of Gdansk, Poland) discussed the possibility of finding something of the historical or rather mythical Achilles in the movie *Troy* (2004): the main aim of the paper was to analyse the impiety of the modern Achilles in comparison to the Homeric one, in order to demonstrate that the modern Achilles is an interpretation of an old character from a new point of view: Achilles himself, according to Ulanowski's analysis, cannot believe to ancient Greek gods, who are too similar to humans. Pascal Lemaire meanwhile talked about Byzantine history and religion in Science Fiction. The Eastern Roman Empire included a lot of cultures with different religions, which become a source of inspiration in the publication of Robert Graves' historical novel *Count Belisarius* (1938). According to Lemaire, the Byzantine location is used in many novels because it can be utilised to criticise religions and sometimes even make fun of them, due to its distance in time and differences with the Catholic tradition. Giulia Mancini (University of Iceland, Háskóli Íslands) studied the sources of *Game of Thrones'* religion (2011-2019), searching for elements that can be attributed to Norse tradition, such as the sacred woods or the water sacrifices. Their analysis, however, showed that the quoted myths could be interpreted as *topoi* of Fantasy literature: the use of religions in *Game of Thrones* can be qualified, according to Mancini, as a phenomenon of "mythologem", specifically an entirely new mythology within Fantasy literature created thanks to traditional themes. Ilaria Bianco (Istituto Nazionale di Studi Storici, Italy) compared two TV series, *Lost* (2004-2010) and *The Leftovers* (2014-2017), set in what appears to be an ordinary world, in the beginning at least, with mysterious happenings and a strong religious connotation. The two series share a sense of uncertainty and doubt, showing a strong connection between secularity and religiosity. The morning panel ended with the presentation of the book *Star Wars. Il Mito dai Mille Volti (Star Wars. The Thousand Faces Myth, 2019)* by Andrea Guglielmino, an Italian cinema journalist with a background in the history of religions. The aim of the book is to stress the importance of anthropological studies on movies by analysing the relationship between

Star Wars (1977) and Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). These commercial movies, grounded on the idea of saga, present many versions of the same character and of the same narrative structure and in each movie the characters (and so the version of the myth that they represent) change and develop.

The afternoon session opened with Jim Clarke's (Coventry University, UK) paper on Buddhism in Science Fiction. Even though there are some studies on the presence of Christianity and Islam within Fantastika, Buddhism is generally less studied, despite its importance in the work of such Science Fiction authors as Arthur C. Clarke, Roger Zelazny, and Frank Herbert. The presence of Buddhism in Science Fiction has a strong connection to its increasing awareness within the United States in the twentieth century and its narrative use changes according to each author. Barbara Giulia Valentina Lattanzi (Università degli Studi di Roma Tre, Italy) approached the representation of Islamic belief in the *Riddick* trilogy (2001-2013), by reporting parts of a direct discussion between herself and the film director David Twohi. Above all, Lattanzi focused on the initial idea of the representation of a Chrislamic religion in the first movie, *Pitch Black* (2000), as a tribute to Clarke. Nicola Pannofino (Università degli Studi di Torino, Italy) analysed the Spanish movie *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) and its emblematic representation of a modern kind of spirituality: the ordinary and extraordinary world need each other. They argued that the main theme is the encounter with that which is other than ourselves in a fairy-tale context in an undefined space and time. Roger Sneed (Furman University, USA) presented a paper on *Black Panther* (2018) and the spirituality that inspired it: Wakanda is a utopian land, with its own religion, and ancestor veneration facilitated via technology. According to Sneed, the movie cannot be considered as a form of escapism: instead, *Black Panther* aims to provide an answer for the existential questions of a part of the black community.

The sessions on 5th July were dedicated to Fantastika narrative prose. Ubaldo Bigli (Università degli Studi di Genova, Italy) presented on funeral rites and the concept of death that lies beneath the *Ayesha* cycle by H. Rider Haggard (1886-1923). *Ayesha* is a liminal character, between death and life and Haggard, through her, can explore his own beliefs on reincarnation, resurrection, and identity. Martina Broccoli and Veronica Orciari (Independent, Italy) analysed two short stories by Philip K. Dick, "Faith of Our Fathers" (1967) and "The Story to End all Stories" (1968). Both present an idea of God: in the first one, God shows itself to men in different ways, or maybe humans conceive the divine in a different way; in the second one, eschatological hope is broken by an act of theophagy, as the Good God is eaten by its own mother. Andrew Daventry (Independent, Italy) presented a paper on Randall Garrett's *Lord Darcy* (1964-1979). In this alternate history, the Catholic Church, which has not been reformed, is the moral authority due to its connection to magic. According to Daventry, Garrett aimed to speculate about a peaceful world, in which all religions are not simply providing their own idea about 'truth,' but are, all of them, providing Good itself: that is the reason why, none of the world's religions can be proven to be bad or undesirable. Chiara Crosignani (Independent, Italy) discussed the dualism between good and evil, order and chaos, creation and destruction in Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* (1990-2013), analysing the evolution of the awareness of the identity of the Dark One, the evil force, in the fourteen books of the series.

In the afternoon session, the first two panels were dedicated to H. P. Lovecraft: Elena Angelucci (Independent, Italy), Tommaso di Piazza (Independent, Italy), and Elena Tiberi (Independent, Italy) proposed a distinction of two kinds of religion in the Lovecraftian corpus: the first one is a personal cosmology, almost self-consistent whose success depends on its particular dreadfulness, of an innovative kind, which stresses the human condition as something little and poor in front of the immensity of the universe. The second kind, the use of other myths and religions, is common in the Weird context, as a literary expedient to control the reader's attention. Alberto Cecon (Independent, Italy) stressed the importance of the meaning of Lovecraft's religious inventions: his deities are not evil, but totally indifferent to human condition; the universe has no purpose and came to existence by chance. The ancient gods are not spiritual or metaphysical, they belong to a physical dimension that humans cannot perceive or understand. There is an endless distance between gods and humans, but divine existence reminds the humans that their sense of safety is not real.

The other two panels in the afternoon were dedicated to two of the most important authors of Italian contemporary literature, Italo Calvino and Primo Levi. Francesca Boldrer (Università degli Studi di Macerata, Italy) analysed Calvino's short stories in *Cosmicomics* (1965), where a protean character, Qwfwq, leads the reader in the history of our universe. Boldrer's aim is to demonstrate that Calvino's *Cosmicomics* can be read as a kind of Science Fiction, even if these short stories seem to pervert the sense of the genre, as they appear as an astrophysical interpretation of the original cosmological myths. Mattia Cravero (Università degli Studi di Torino, Italy) approached the presence of Science Fiction themes in Levi's *Natca Saga* (1966), a collection of short stories where a Promethean like character forces humans to use their sense of responsibility: these stories aim to make people think about technology and the risks of rationality. According to Cravero's analysis, Levi here tries to explain that humanity cannot have a complete knowledge, even through science, and this limit will take humanity to an inevitable catastrophe. In Cravero's understanding, it is only ethics that can prevent the disaster, and that is the meaning of Levi's reworking on ancient cultural archetypes.

The morning session of 6th July was dedicated to religions whose success has something to do with Science Fiction or Fantasy literature. Eleonora d'Agostino (Università la Sapienza di Roma, Italy) presented a paper on the experience of Ron Hubbard, the founder of the Church of Scientology, as a Science Fiction writer tied to the magazine *Astounding Science Fiction* and the authors who wrote on it. Gianni Trapletti (Independent, Italy) discussed Bokonism, a religion created by Kurt Vonnegut in *Cat's Cradle* (1963). Vonnegut was an atheist and Bokonism is clearly an invented religion, and the characters of the book themselves are totally aware of this peculiarity. Bokonism was created only as a way to stop evil human actions and to prevent political and military errors. Trapletti aimed to show how the ethical value of Bokonism can be understood as a demonstration of the commitment of Vonnegut to ethics and politics: religion may be a superstition, but it allows humans to keep the faith in an eventual improvement of our morality and Bokonism is a clear example of a false religion with a remarkable good effect. Roberto Arduini (Independent, Italy) discussed religious movements inspired by Tolkien: these movements, born in the hippie culture of the 1960s, gained more strength after the publishing of *The Silmarillion* (1977). According to some of the adherents of these religious movements, Tolkien has to be considered as the modern discoverer of a secret (but real) history, which humanity forgot. However, to other adherents of these faiths, Tolkien could

also be considered as not completely a human being, who still had memory of past lives. Arduini's contribution aimed to give an overall view on Tolkien's derived religions, in order to explain that according to some of these religions *The Silmarillion* and other related works would not be mere fictional narratives but a kind of revealed 'truth.'

The second morning session focused on religions created in a fantastical context. Marcos Bella-Fernández (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain) and Leticia Cortina Aracil (Independent, Spain) analysed the religions created by Spanish groups playing different kinds of Live Action Role Playing (LARP) games. Giuseppe Cuscito (Vanderbilt University, USA) presented a paper on the origins of paleoastronautics, the belief in ancient inhabitants of other worlds who inhabited earth. This tradition, which took its origins in Science Fiction literature, has now instigated belief for some communities.

In the afternoon session, Liliana Tangorra (Università degli Studi di Bari, Italy) explored the tradition of fantastic beasts, from the *Physiologus* to the *Harry Potter* saga by J. K. Rowling (1997-2007). The panel particularly analysed the Italian and French editions of the seven books and their illustrated covers by Italian artist Serena Riglietti and French artist Jean-Claude Götting. Caterina Agus (Università degli Studi di Torino, Italy) presented an analysis of bear cults, in order to demonstrate how modern authors as Tolkien and George R. R. Martin were inspired by ancient fairy tales while writing their novels. Sebastian Schwibach (Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici, Italy) presented a paper dedicated to C. S. Lewis, specifically the cosmology and divine in his space trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), *Perelandra* (1943), and *That Hideous Strength* (1945). Schwibach aimed to demonstrate that Lewis, in this trilogy, analyses theological, ontological, and anthropological issues, through the notion of Good and, above all, of Evil, and their struggle on a physical and intellectual perspective.

The main research fields during the conference were dedicated to Fantastika religions as a way to understand the social function of religion itself in human societies. Authors facilitate this by drawing on old religions and myths while also creating new ones, in a process that we can call mythogem, according to the proposal made by Giulia Mancini. As societies quickly change, new myths arise in order to fulfil the needs of this new humanity, needs that ancient myths do not satisfy anymore. The conference showed a more investigative approach to religion in Science Fiction, while contemporary Fantasy seems more likely a way to convey new proposals on the use of religion and myths. The theme should, however, be discussed further, as only a few works were analysed in the four days of the Velletri conference.

BIONOTE

Chiara Crosignani completed her PhD in 2013 at the University of Salerno, Italy, with a dissertation on the meaning of the word 'daimon' between the Classic and the Christian Era. In 2014, she undertook a post-doctorate on the religions of ancient Mediterranean. In 2018, she undertook a Master Degree in Public History at the University Statale of Milan. She writes divulgation papers on Modern Fantasy for the Italian *Fantasy Magazine*.