Messengers from the Stars: On Science Fiction and Fantasy

No. 7 – 2025

Site | http://messengersfromthestars.letras.ulisboa.pt/journal/
Contact | mfts.journal@gmail.com

ISSN | 2183-7465
Editor | Centro de Estudos Anglísticos da Universidade de Lisboa |
University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies
Alameda da Universidade – Faculdade de Letras
1600-214 Lisboa – Portugal

This work is financed by national funds through the FCT – Foundation for Science and Technology, I.P., within the scope of UID/00114 – University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies (ULICES).

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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 pilar 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*

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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*

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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.[1] 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

[1] 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[2], 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.).[3] 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

[2] 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.

[3] 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 21st 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.[4] 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

[4] "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,[5] 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[6], 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

[5] 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).

[6] 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.[7] 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[8], 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

[7] See: Barbour, Donahue, and Precup.

[8] 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 comradery. 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 heroicity by showing Nimona kindness and acceptance.

Moreover, Nimona's monstrousness 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 a 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)[9]

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,

[9] 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.[10]

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

[10] 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.

Acknowledgements

This work was funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) through the PhD grant no. 2023.00682.BD

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