

Introduction: Fantasy between Text and Image

Neomedieval Patterns of Visualization

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1. Literature and Visible Presentation

In the last chapter J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Vol. 1 of the *Lord of the Rings*), the city of Minas Tirith is described in Frodo's vision on the summit of Amon Hen as follows:

Then turning south again he beheld Minas Tirith. Far away it seemed, and beautiful: white-walled, many-towered, proud and fair upon its mountain-seat; its battlements glittered with steel, and its turrets were bright with many banners. (Tolkien 1999a, 527)

In our mind's eye, we see a white, walled city right on the mountain in the distance, with countless banners fluttering on its towers: its appearance, location and decoration immediately remind us of a medieval fortress. But for a more detailed description we have to wait until Gandalf and Pippin reach Minas Tirith in the first chapter of *The Return of the King*:

For the fashion of Minas Tirith was such that it was built on seven levels, each delved into the hill, and about each was set a wall, and in each wall was a gate. But the gates were not set in a line: the Great Gate in the City Wall was at the east point of the circuit, but the next faced half south, and the third half north, and so to and fro upwards. (...) For partly in the primeval shaping of the hill, partly by the mighty craft and labour of old, there stood up from the rear of the wide court behind the Gate a towering bastion of stone, its edge sharp as a ship-keel facing east. Up it rose, even to the level of the topmost circle, and there was crowned by a battlement; so that those in the Citadel might, like mariners in a mountainous ship, look from its peak sheer down upon the Gate seven hundred feet below. The entrance to the Citadel also looked eastward, but was delved in the heart of the rock; thence a long lamp-lit slope ran up to the seventh gate. Thus men reached at last the High Court, and the Place of the Fountain before the feet of the White Tower:

tall and shapely, fifty fathoms from its base to the pinnacle, where the banner of the Stewards floated a thousand feet above the plain. (Tolkien 1999b, 11–12)

Fig. 1: Minas Tirith by Alan Lee (detail, © Alan Lee)



Here we learn more about the construction and appearance of the city; there are, of course, a number of fantastical elements, most notably the dizzying height of the citadel and its shape of a ship's keel. But even here we can imagine a medieval city with a castle using lexical markers such as gate, city wall, arched tunnel, bastion, citadel, high court, white tower, banner of the stewards. It is this last reference to the lords of the city, the stewards, that shows us that we are somehow dealing with power relations that we know from the European Middle Ages. This becomes even clearer in the third, short section, when Pippin enters the great hall:

Pippin looked into a great hall. It was lit by deep windows in the wide aisles at either side, beyond the rows of tall pillars that upheld the roof. Monoliths of black marble, they rose to great capitals carved in many strange figures of beasts and leaves; and far above in shadow the wide vaulting gleamed with dull gold, inset with flowing traceries of many colours. No hangings nor storied webs, nor any things of woven stuff or of wood, were to be seen in that long solemn hall; but between the pillars there stood a silent company of tall images graven in cold stone. (Tolkien 1999b, 14–15)

Fig. 2: Minas Tirith by John Howe (detail, © John Howe)



The cathedral and monastery architecture of the Gothic Middle Ages immediately comes to mind here; a medieval, sacred interior is also evoked by what is not present but is mentioned, i.e. wall hangings or tapestries, objects made of fabric and wood. At the other end of the hall stands a throne in the form of a crowned helmet.

Every reader of *The Lord of the Rings* can imagine Minas Tirith quite well from this description, but remains alone with these ideas. However, since the illustrations by Alan Lee, John Howe and the film by Peter Jackson, images of the city have become popular and imprinted in our collective memory, so that we continue to associate them with the city; their strong impact is certainly due to their own visual aesthetics, but also to the accuracy with which they have shaped Tolkien's narrative details.

Tolkien himself was somewhat skeptical and suspicious of the pictorial representation of his story: in 1967 he wrote to Unwin, his publisher: »I myself am not at all anxious for *The Lord of the Rings* to be illustrated by anybody whether a genius or not.« (Scull/Hammond 2006, Vol.1: 692).¹ And this despite the fact that *The Hobbit* had of course already been published with his own illustrations and the paperback with a cover by Pauline Baynes, who also illustrated *Farmer Giles of Ham*. Of course, he had already made sketches for his stories, but did not want to publish them at first. He justified his refusal to illustrate them in *On Fairy Stories* as follows:

In human art, Fantasy is best left to words, to true literature. In painting, for instance, the visible presentation of the fantastic image is technically too easy; the hand tends to outrun the mind, even to overthrow it... However good in themselves, illustrations do little good to fairy stories. The radical distinction between all art (including drama) that offers a visible presentation and true literature is that it imposes one visible form. Literature works from mind to mind and is thus more progenitive. It is at once more universal and more poignantly particular. (Tolkien 1983: 159).

Tolkien makes an important distinction here, which separates literature as a linguistic-rhetorical presentation from visual presentation: the latter »imposes one visible form« – it is the exclusivity and finality with which an illustration fixes a literary text

1 For Tolkien, the »illustration of a book does not and should not have an aesthetic life of its own« (Tankard 2019: 31); he stressed »faithfulness« and »fidelity« to his original text. To Pauline Baynes he spoke of »decorations« and »a series of pictures in the margins« (ibid.: 31). Tolkien estimated the illustrations by Mary Fairburn most, calling them »splendid«. »They are better pictures in themselves and also show far more attention to the text than any that have yet been submitted to me« (cfr. Tolkien's correspondence with M. Fairburn, Tolkien Estate, quoted after Tankard 2019: 24). He even accepted to produce a first illustrated edition with Fairburn's illustrations: »After seeing your specimens I am beginning to change my mind, and I think that an illustrated edition might be a good thing.« (Tolkien, Letter to Fairburn, quoted after Tankard: 33).

to pictoriality. We then have hardly any more possibilities to imagine things – Minas Tirith – differently than they are shown to us by the visual media. Illustrations thus limit a previously pictorially unlimited form, the literary narrative. And Tolkien doubts whether ‘illustration’ is actually capable of representing ‘art’, i.e. literature, correctly and completely.

I put this example at the beginning of this volume to make a few things clear that all of the chapters are concerned with. First of all, in Tolkien as in Epic Fantasy in general, the visual aesthetics of fantasy apparently already draw heavily on medieval pre-images, props and narrative forms and use these patterns extensively, admittedly without drawing historical boundaries to other eras such as antiquity, the Migration Period or the Renaissance. The Middle Ages are voracious in this respect and simply incorporate the neighboring eras (Velten 2018: 17). Fantasy as a genre thrives on the neomedieval visualization of castles and walled cities, of kings, fairies and heroes on horseback, their fights and battles as well as their weapons and thing symbols, some of which take on an iconic character. How does this affect illustrations, images, maps and book design, also with regard to the development of the Fantasy genre? What results can be observed in intermedia transfer? Is the neomedieval groundwork of the texts reinforced by visual aesthetics?

Secondly, these images Tolkien creates are closely linked to their linguistic semantics, when a walled castle on a cliff, with towers, banners and a ‘palas’-like hall is mentioned, in which a Steward with royal pretensions sits on the throne. The question here is how the illustration of (in this case: medieval) political, cultural, and social structures and events interprets the semantics inherent in the narrative, whether and in what way it adopts or deletes, adapts or transforms them. This is because the visual field is almost always based on semantic structures that give meaning to the text. The nature of these relationships and how the visual aesthetic changes the semantics of Fantasy in the respective genres will have to be better explored.

It is highly interesting, thirdly, to explore the relationship between different forms of visualization and the literary text: the illustrations and other paratexts of Fantasy (Genette 1997), such as the images on book covers, the sometimes very elaborate but often also very imprecise maps of the worlds created, or even the ornamental elements, however inconspicuous they may be? Do they limit it, as Tolkien believed, and if not, what do they achieve? What part do they play in the popularity of Fantasy works in books, films and games? How commercial are they? Are there references to images of the Middle Ages that were already popularized in the 19th century?

2. Fantasy Aesthetic(s): Some Perspectives

Today, Fantasy is one of the most popular intermedia entertainment genres worldwide. Its growing attention in recent decades is not only reflected in charts and rankings, but also in the form of popular cultural events such as Peter Jackson's film adaptation of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* or the highly successful HBO series *Game of Thrones*, based on the novel series by George R.R. Martin.

Among the many reasons contributing to this popularity, the visualization of heroic and villainous characters, relevant spaces and locations, battles and fights in the visual media of Fantasy (like book covers and illustrations, maps, posters and display material, films and serials, images on websites etc.) is highly significant. However, this visualization has hardly been seen by scholars of the genre so far, and it has also been studied only selectively (exceptions are the works of Tolkien, cf. Hammond/Scull 2018, Alexander 2016). Yet it is not only the intratextual heroes, settings, and motifs of individual novels that exhibit iconic quality; it is also mythic archetypes of characters, things, buildings, and landscapes that together constitute the imagery of Fantasy.

This visual aesthetic has iconographic antecedents in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It is part of the much larger and comprehensive fantastic art, which has been an important current in European iconography since Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel (Holländer 1980; Brittnacher 2013). In this regard, Fantasy imagery refers to literary motifs, materials, and sources from the mythologies of the Middle Ages and antiquity: the songs of the Old Norse Edda, the Celtic tales about King Arthur and his Round Table, the Germanic heroic epics, the Finnish Kalevala. Here we find patterns and models that have entered the genre (which, in sensu strictu, only begins with Tolkien) via various routes from their aesthetic absorption in Romanticism and 19th-century historicism: Dragons and monsters, dwarves and elves, wizards, demons and witches, fairies and mermaids, kings and princesses, chivalrously armed heroes and their dark antagonists, mysterious and animate, often pseudo-religious objects and weapons, talking animals, giants, trolls, and other monstra (Kowalski 2020). They, together with neomedieval spaces (steep cathedral walls, high towers, moats and city walls, ruins of castles, temples and monasteries, dark forests and battle panoramas), often garishly lit and featuring bold color combinations, form a large part of the reservoir of Fantasy iconography. This strangeness of nature and environment, based on the invalidity of natural laws and a historical and cultural distance that makes the manifestations of images, figures, and spaces components of »other worlds«, can be seen as the basis for this iconography. Together with its topographical localization on maps, it is part of the »fantastic neomedievalism« that Umberto Eco had already described in 1986. Tolkien's maps, for example, which were designed analogously to medieval maps of places and ways, show a complete mythopoetic Fantasy world able to stimulate pictures and illustrations (Klinger 2011; Bunting/

Currie 2020). In general, »significant elements of Tolkien's mythology« appeared simultaneously with the texts also in pictorial form, as recent studies of his illustrations have revealed (Hammond/Scull 2018).

That has been very generally speaking so far, because if we look at the cover designs, maps and illustrations from seventy years of Fantasy literature, there are of course other iconographic sources than medieval ones (Doyle/Grove 2019). For example, *Sword and Sorcery Fantasy* makes greater use of warrior figures from ancient and pre-medieval times along the lines of Robert E. Howard's *Conan the Barbarian*, often depicting them in their naked physicality, but also hybridizing them with monster figures or images of the present day. The context in which this genre has its roots, the American pulp magazines, also influenced its open and expansive fantastic imagery (Luckhurst et al. 2018; Haining 2020).

The aim of the volume is to expand and differentiate these observations, to relate them to the iconographic tradition of the fantastic, and thus to better explore and understand the visual aesthetics of Fantasy. Hence, in turn, their part in the popularity of the genre – for example, through commercial strategies of image staging – should become more visible, as well as their influence on the respective text should be examined more closely. The volume is designed to be interdisciplinary in order to initiate exchange between approaches in literary studies, art history, and book studies. The subject of the conference will consist of the production of visualizations of global Fantasy in its diverse media manifestations: Book illustrations and covers (novel and graphic novel), image design in comics, visual figurations in film and television series, the various visualizations in role-playing, video and computer games of Fantasy.

The questions which guide this volume on pictorial Fantasy patterns and their role in popularizing Fantasy media are closely linked to some of the assumptions and theses of the DFG-funded Collaborative Research Centre 1472 »Transformations of the Popular« in Siegen, which uses the term »second-order popularization« to refer to the exhibition of popularity in visual and textual strategies geared towards media communication and commercial success (Werber et al. 2023). This also means that Fantasy visualizations in graphic novels, films, series and games strongly reinforce the popularity of certain Fantasy books and stories, as can be seen, for example, in the popularization of Andrzej Sapkowski's *The Witcher* through the comic of the same name and the video game. We keep this second-order popularization in mind when we ask ourselves in the individual analyses what the media change or media combination means for the respective work and its visual aesthetics.

3. Contributions

The contributions of this volume treat the following topics:

1. Images of Fantasy literature: cover design, illustrations, book decorations and maps in Fantasy novels and series of different epochs and authors. Tolkien himself had illustrated his novels and decorated them with »kaleidoscopic patterns«. The global reception of *The Lord of the Rings* called for renowned illustrators who worked out numerous editions: John Howe, Alan Lee, Frank Frazetta, Boris Vallejo are only some of the most important among them (Auger 2008, Alexander 2016). Some of them have issued own Fantasy drawing and painting techniques (Vallejo 1987; Howe 2007).

2. Fantastic iconography in the 19th and early 20th centuries: Victorian painting, for example, of the Pre-Raphaelites with their decidedly medieval references, the medieval book art of someone like William Morris, the works of the Arts & Crafts movement, the *Ars Fantastica* of Surrealism (cf. Lottes 1984, Biemer 2011, Prettejohn 2012, Suriano 2005, Goodwin 2015). Here, the focus is primarily on the archetypes of medieval reception in nineteenth-century medievalism, but also on other patterns of fantastic iconography (e.g., in W.R. Lethaby, cf. Boos 2020) constructing the visual aesthetics of Fantasy. The goal is to demonstrate adaptations of such iconographic patterns in material design, coloration, and decoration in Fantasy. Similarly, the inclusion of medieval archetypes in pulp magazines and dime novels of the early 20th century, such as the illustrations in magazines like *Saturday Evening Post*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *McClure's*, *Argosy*, *Eerie*, *Prince Valiant*, etc. (Earle 2009, Kowalski 2020) is worth to be examined.

3. Fantasy imagery can also be seen in graphic novels, movies, series, and games. Since the release of the major Fantasy films and television series after 2000, which once again popularize Tolkien's or Martin's popular novels, Fantasy iconography is inevitably changing as a result of the shift to the visual medium. The question which this intermedial expansion entails may be clarified on the basis of individual analyses of graphic novels, films, series, and games (such as *Dungeons & Dragons* or *The Witcher*) (see Packard 2009, Dolle-Weinkauff 2010, Harvey 2013, and Bärtle 2017).

The volume starts with **Mirja Beck's** survey entitled »Aesthetics without Pictures? – (Literary) Book Illustration between High and Low Culture«, in which she examines the history of book illustrations and their negative assessment in high culture since the 19th century. In doing so, she provides an overview of the numerous voices of literary criticism, whose objections to the illustration of books are organized in three categories: 1) criticism against an increasing quantity of illustrations; 2) arguments for adult pictureless literature as distinguished compared to illustrated children's books, and 3) the fear of undermining readers' imagination through the use of imagery. As an exception, Fantasy literature is identified as an »imaginative genre« less affected by the highbrow prohibition of images – instead,

the addition of certain images can contribute to marking Fantasy books as objects of value.

In »The Visual Realization of Fantastic Worlds on Book Covers«, **Melanie Korte** shares her experiences as a seasoned illustrator of Fantasy literature. In doing so, she highlights the visual strategies employed with landscape and character images that have become increasingly important in the face of online marketing and contemporary publishing strategies. Korte identifies the visual role models that emerge from international bestsellers and established genre conventions as important influences for the conceptualization of illustrations – aiming to create a world that is both immediately recognizable as medieval and ahistorical, and thereby in explicit contrast to the genre of historical fiction. The author underlines, finally, the changing role of the illustrator as a creative professional in today's book and media markets, restricted by more and more incisive publisher's decisions.

The next chapter starts with the central topic of representational display in Fantasy: how should elves being illustrated? In »Beautiful and Sublime – and Never mind the Pointed Ears. Visualizing the Elves throughout the centuries«, **Thomas Honegger** in his thoroughly worked contribution investigates the heterogeneous representations and motif traditions of elves in literature from the Early Middle Ages to Shakespeare's »A Midsummer Night's Dream« up to the 19th century – and identifies the sources Tolkien productively adapted for the conception of his »Arda« cosmos, transforming Tolkien's literary legacy and its adaptations. Here, elves are gradually distinguished from diminutive Victorian-era »flower-fairies« and become visible as the luminous, ageless beings that Alan Lee's and John Howe's illustrations and finally Peter Jackson's »The Lord of the Rings« film trilogy has rendered archetypes of contemporary Fantasy media. This popular imagination of the elf becomes, however, visible as transformative still in the latest TV adaptation of Tolkien's works, Amazon's »The Rings of Power«.

Starting also with Tolkien's works, **Judith Klinger** examines in an exhaustive essay entitled »Visualizing the Never-Seen: Models of Time, Space, and History in Fantasy Cartography« secondary world maps archetypal for the genre, using the examples of Tolkien's »Middle Earth«, Lewis's »Narnia« and Martin's »Westeros«. The chapter initially describes the emergence of the 1980 general map of Middle-earth from different previous maps to acquire a multilayered character, and shows pertinent interrelations to historical (medieval) patterns of mapping in Tolkien and Lewis. In contrast, the Westeros maps are subject to continuous serialization and transformation, being constantly reworked in the HBO series and reflecting on cartographic modernisms. While the primary function of maps is to offer guidance into worlds only explorable through narration, they can strategically highlight or withhold information to the reader. Here, the various examples illustrate a complex interplay of visual strategies, hybrid historicizations, and markers of seriality, thus

becoming recognizable as liminal zones in which Fantasy-specific incoherences between incompatible models of space and time are displayed.

The following two chapters address the paratextual framework of Fantasy novels and series in book trade and marketing. In her chapter »The Fantasy Novel as Commodity. The Aesthetics of a Neomedieval Book Design«, **Theresa Specht** explores the visual strategies relevant to the design of Fantasy books. Here, book covers fluctuate between genre marker, unique feature and vehicle of information, thereby becoming recognizable as intersections of semiotic systems. On the basis of influential genre examples from Martin's »A Song of Ice and Fire« to Markus Heitz' »Dwarves« series, Specht shows the development of book design in neomedieval Fantasy literature. Further, she identifies the genre's »neomedieval aesthetic« characterized by distinct and reproducible features which also relate to the content and world building of the plot. As a result of increasingly refined marketing strategies and interchangeable inventories, the Fantasy novel is thus rendered a commodity.

In »Medievalist Aesthetics and Marketing Strategies: Some Thoughts on Cover Design from the 1980s to the Present«, **Miriam Strieder** outlines the history of the Fantasy genre's visual appropriation of the Middle Ages, starting at the major aesthetic impulses generated by Tolkien and his medievalist influences in Art nouveau. An important turning point for the genre's formation and its book covers becomes visible in the enduring »medievalist hype« since the 1980s, starting with the neomedieval cover designs of Fred Marcellino, which has since broadened common knowledge about the Middle Ages readily available within popular culture. Based on Gillian Bradshaw's trilogy »Down the Long Wind«, whose cover designs of English and German editions are compared, Strieder shows not only a shift to art nouveau and other medievalist patterns and signs – due to a younger target audience –, but also identifies an increasing number of references to the period's architecture, art and literature.

The subsequent chapters aim to show in different ways how fantastic and Fantasy media in contemporary popular culture resume and adapt medieval myths and narratives, paradigms and ideas. It starts with an investigation into the perseverance of medievalist artistic patterns of the Victorian period in Fantasy illustration and design. In »William Morris's Medievalist Visual Aesthetics and its Persistence in Fantasy«, **Hans Rudolf Velten** identifies the Victorian artist's medievalist style as a defining factor for the artistic development of Fantasy literature and its most influential cornerstones. Velten identifies three categories of Morris's specific style (ornamentation, typography and image design) as decisive elements, which continue to inform the staging of Fantasy books as richly decorated works of art and objects of value. Morris thus becomes the initiator of the genre's »(neo)medieval ethos formula«, which is already visible in a number of adaptive works as early as 1920. Conclusively, the essay offers an abbreviated survey of examples showing the adaption and transformation of Morris's and Victorian design patterns.

In »Unicorns in Contemporary Popular Culture«, **Joseph Imorde** examines the historical development of the unicorn motif from mythical creature of the Middle Ages to present-day merchandising products and screen presence in which it acquires fantastical magic. In reference to the ambivalent concept of »cuteness« theorized by Sianne Ngai, the unicorn becomes visible as canvas for various semantic properties, revealing an ambiguity that has long been inscribed in the dual nature of the creature, existing at the threshold of fact and fiction for centuries – as symbol of chastity and promiscuity, Christ and devil alike. Recalling some early family letters of Sigmund Freud on shared domestic idyll by filling living spaces with emotions, as well as Martin Heidegger's reflections on dwelling, Imorde identifies the contemporary popularity of the unicorn in media primarily in its escapist potential, representing a safeguarded magical world absent of any danger.

In »Fantasy Medievalism. On the Aesthetic of the Mythical«, **Racha Kirakosian** compares the HBO series »Game of Thrones« to the medieval narratives »Herzog Ernst« and »Mélusine« in order to underline and discuss common motifs: The character of Daenerys Targaryen thus becomes visible in her bestial femininity (Mélusine tradition), while the show's exploration of the country of Dorne shows striking resemblance to orientalist imaginations of the East such as staged in the Herzog Ernst Epic. Drawing on Valentin Groebner's thesis of medieval 'post-productions' in the image machines of film and tourism, as well as on Ernst Cassirer's concept of »mythical thinking«, Kirakosian develops an »aesthetics of the mythical« characterized by its synthesizing approach to elements of the historical and the imaginary. She argues that this aesthetic applies to the Fantasy genre and its highly reproduceable visual worlds, while its predecessors already become visible in the medieval source material.

In »Reception of Medieval Literature in Science Fiction Series«, **Isabella Managò** examines three exemplary episodes of influential sci-fi series (»Doctor Who«, »Star Trek«, »Legends of Tomorrow«) in order to determine the specific appropriation of the Middle Ages, its related myths and literature by the genre. The central question is how the three Science Fiction episodes discuss the relationship between literature and history and reflect their own fictional status inside popular knowledge.

While their common denominators can be identified in elements of serial storytelling, here archetypes of medieval literature are also subject to critical and humorous reflection and are thereby adapted to the viewing conventions of modern audiences. At the pop-cultural threshold of historical and Fantasy elements, Managò further discusses the tension arising from an interaction of fictionality and (asserted) authenticity in both medieval and modern media.

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Illustrations

Fig. 1: Detail from Alan Lee: Minas Tirith. Illustration for Book V, Chapter I, Minas Tirith, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. London/New York 1991, available online: <https://arthur.io/art/alan-lee/minas-tirith> [accessed: 1 March 2024]. Copyright Alan Lee.

Fig. 2: John Howe: Minas Tirith. 2002, available online: https://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/File:John_Howe_-_Minas_Tirith.jpg [accessed: 1 March 2024]. Copyright John Howe.