

The Fantasy Novel as Commodity

The Aesthetics of a Neomedieval Book Design

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Bookshops have their own logics and aesthetics. In the branches of large bookshop chains – just as in department stores and supermarkets – there is clearly nothing random about the arrangement of the products. In this environment, books are presented not so much as the unique oeuvres of authors, but rather as consumer goods that seek to be noticed and sold. Their arrangement and combination is based on a calculated marketing strategy (cf. Drügh 2015: 14).¹ One way to direct customers' attention is to arrange books in product groups, another is to conspicuously display (potentially) popular books near the shop entrance (cf. Clement, Hille et al. 2008: 752).

Local bookshops frequently position books together based on the principle of ›customers who bought this item also bought...‹. But this principle is already incorporated in the production process, as shown by the strikingly homogeneous colouring and design of particular product groups (cf. Phillips 2007: 29f.). If you find yourself looking at pastel backgrounds, floral decorations and rose-gold lettering, you have to be in the ›chick lit‹ section. This literature, written by, for and about women, is not really defined by character constellations, plot elements – mostly connected to men – or motifs. Instead, as the German Wikipedia entry explains, the attribution of individual works to this subgenre of popular literature is ›mainly implied by the literary market and the book trade, which have offered a flood of pastel-coloured covers on separate shelves labelled ›(freche) Frauen‹ ((sassy) women)« (Wikipedia, 2023).² This suggests that the genre is defined by the marketing departments of publishing houses. They establish and develop conventions of cover design to attract the attention of a certain class of female buyer: ›publishers have grouped certain works under a combination of subject-matter, packaging and marketing. The covers are

1 Drügh's observation about supermarkets, that products, product images and consumption have a ›culture-forming, culture-ordering and culture-interpreting function« (Drügh 2015: 14), can also be applied to bookshops.

2 All German citations translated by T.S.

candy-bright, heavy in pink and fluorescence. The titles are also candy-bright« (Knox 2000).

A similar literary homogeneity can also be detected on the book covers in another corner of the bookshop. Pastel is replaced by black as the defining colour; floral designs give way to swords, axes and armour; the lettering is no longer rose-gold but silver, bronze or gold. A glance into the shelves of Fantasy literature reveals these and other family resemblances.³ They are an important hint that the book cover does more than just protect the body of the book from damage during transport and use (technical function). As a market of unique products, the book market is characterized by structural insecurity and uncertainty of quality. The range of products is overwhelmingly large, but it is difficult to get enough information before buying to avoid making a mistake (cf. Karpik 2007: 13–25; Reichert 2017: 13–18). In this context, the cover design has important functions. The book cover serves to give orientation to buyers, »because the main aim is to convey the character of the book, the genre. Readers must be able to assess at a glance what awaits them« (orientation function) (Wilking 2021a: 17). The cover design does not allow fully reliable conclusions about the quality and fit of the purchase, yet its specificity appears to alleviate the structural uncertainty of the book-buying process. At the same time, the cover design draws attention to the book (cf. Magenau 2018: 379), which needs to conform to its Fantasy surrounding while standing out as something special (advertising function): »They [the covers; TS] must fit the pigeonhole and be original at the same time. [...] For bookshops, though, they have to be designed in such a way that they are placed on the appropriate table and nonetheless stand out on that table« (Wilking 2021a: 17). According to the statistics, even focused buyers only look at a book for eight seconds at most. This means that the product has no time to convince them with the blurb or the novel's opening – the cover is what counts! It has been estimated that 70% of all book purchases are motivated by the cover design (cf. Magenau 2018: 379f.; Erben 2005: 98). This makes it all the more crucial that this design gives a reliable impression of the content that can be expected. Thus, the book cover, in its creative function, contributes to an overall aesthetic conception of the commodity on sale, the novel (cf. Huse 2013: 91f.).

The question to be asked about popular Fantasy literature, then, is this: how does it use cover design to make the Fantasy novel an aesthetically complete, precisely composed product, negotiating the tension between genre affiliation and exceptionality, between attracting attention and providing information? To answer this,

3 Ludwig Wittgenstein uses this term to define the concept of »game«, for which – because of the combination of commonalities and particularities of different games – no definition of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions can be established: »the various resemblances between members of a family [...] overlap and criss-cross in the same way« (Wittgenstein 2009: 36).

we must begin with semiotic considerations, to clarify what kind of sign system a cover design is and how it is able to generate meaning (1.). The second section of this chapter gives a short history of the book design of popular Fantasy (2.). Works of Epic Fantasy are considered to be ›neomedieval‹ since they appropriate and transform medieval inventories and narratives to create holistic, secondary worlds (cf. Eco 1986; Velten 2018: 14). Although aspects of these worlds or the worlds as such can be perceived as somewhat ›medieval‹, they do not refer to the Middle Ages as a historic period. This for example distinguishes the Epic Fantasy from historical novels, which evoke a historic past (c.f. Velten 2024a). In the context of this evolution of book design, the third section gives a detailed analysis of the cover design of the first volume of Markus Heitz's *Zwerge* (*Dwarves*) series, published by Piper in 2016. This analysis also includes the design of the series as a whole (3.). The aim of the article is to identify a specific neomedieval book aesthetics of popular Fantasy, in which perceived ›medievalness‹ becomes the aesthetic signum of the Fantasy novel as commodity.

1. Semiotics of the Book Cover

A book's cover does not simply stop the pages from falling apart. It has a greater function for the novel. Its design combines a multitude of verbal and non-verbal sign systems, including colour, typography, text and image. The book is a »polysemiotic, complex« sign system (Mayer 2014: 199). This applies both to the ›literary novel‹, which is part of high culture and takes a very reflexive approach to the medium of the book (cf. Schmitz-Emans 2019: 43–49),⁴ and to the popular Fantasy novel. In its specific medial manifestation, the physical book and its design have meaning; the physical book itself has a communicative value which transcends that of the material text it contains. This text – surrounded by the book cover – develops an autonomous meaning and aesthetics in the assemblage of its signs. The outward appearance of the book as a medium – its colour, illustrations, typography, or the way it feels to the touch – must be categorically distinguished from the semantics and aesthetics of the text. But the book cover itself also has meaning and develops its own aesthetics. These do not change the book's content, but the cover design frames the book's reception in a way that makes a difference (or, in its function as an incentive to buy, it makes reception possible in the first place): »The materiality of objects of communication necessarily constitutes a spectrum of object dimensions, which can po-

4 While there is a huge volume of research on literary novels (»Buchliteratur«), far less work has been done on book design in popular literature and its aesthetics. Lohmüller (2008: 7) suggests that this is due to a defensive reaction among researchers, who are critical of contemporary popular culture.

tentially be semanticized and therefore serve as signifier for a signified, in semiotic interdependence with the supposed ›content« (Fleuster 2022: 58).

To understand how the book cover generates meaning, some semiotic reflections are needed about what type of sign systems we are dealing with here. The book text is a signifier for a concrete narrative, such as the story of Frodo, the fate of Danaerys Targaryen and Jon Snow, or the tale of the Witcher Geralt and his adoptive daughter Ciri (the signified). This could also be described as a primary sign system, in which the signifier and the signified are combined (cf. Barthes 2010: 256).⁵ This sign, consisting of the book text and the narrative, is combined with the book cover – consisting of text, illustrations, colour and typography – to form a new sign system. This can be described as a secondary sign system, like the one which Roland Barthes identifies in the myth: »In myth, we find again the tri-dimensional pattern which I have just described: the signifier, the signified and the sign. But myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system. That which is a sign [...] in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second« (Barthes 2000: 114).⁶ For book design this means that the sign system consisting of the book text and the narrative becomes the signified of the secondary sign system, in which the book design becomes the signifier (cf. Mayer 2014: 201–202). It is only this combination of primary and secondary sign systems that makes it clear how the combination of book text and book cover can generate a meaning which is added to that of the novel itself and allows buyers in the bookshop to make well-founded assumptions about what kind of (Fantasy) novel they are looking at.

The meaning arising through and with the book design can be generated in at least three ways, as Franziska Mayer describes (cf. Mayer 2014: 200). Firstly, the materiality of the book allows conclusions to be drawn about its context of production. Thread sewn or adhesive binding, hardcover or paperback, gilt edges or not, elaborate design or not: all this can give hints as to how much symbolic or economic capital the book offers buyers and sellers – or how much it demands of them. The family resemblances in book design that can be observed within a genre point to a second possibility of generating meaning: conventionalization. Verbal and non-verbal signs become markers of genres, popular plot elements or character constellations. Often, core design elements first appear in particularly popular books and are

5 »We must here be on our guard for despite common parlance which simply says that the signifier expresses the signified, we are dealing, in any semiological system, not with two, but with three different terms [...] there are, therefore, the signifier, the signified and the sign, which is the associative total of the first two terms« (Barthes 2000: 113).

6 In his work on the language of fashion (1990: 28), Barthes uses the concept of metalanguage: »in the second case, the primary system (ERC) constitutes the level of content for the secondary system [...]; system 1 then corresponds to the level of object language, system 2 to the level of metalanguage.«

then conventionalized by repetition and variation. This can be observed, for example, in the international bestseller *P.S. I Love You* by Cecilia Ahern: its sky-blue colour scheme, combined with wispy clouds and a curvy, script title font, had a major influence on the design of similar novels (cf. Mayer 2014: 204–206). Following the success of Daniel Kehlmann and Peter Wohlleben, their would-be emulators imitate their colour schemes – ›Kehlmann blue‹ and ›Wohlleben green‹ – to signal their affinity with these popular predecessors and thus attract more attention (cf. Magenau 2018: 379–381). The books following Dan Brown's global successes, books that expose secrets of the church as an institution, display a striking »combination of clerical-religious motifs and black and red colour schemes«. This shows that conventionalizations can apply not only to colours but also to motifs, objects and typography (Mayer 2014: 205).

Thirdly, book design can generate meaning by producing relations of similarity between the exterior and interior of a book. Armour and swords on the front cover allow the assumption that the novel itself is also concerned with knights in armour, who fight their way through their adventures, sword in hand. Such ›iconic relations of illustration‹ (Mayer 2014: 200) can refer to archetypal characters, objects relevant to the plot, key motifs or narrative structures, which the novel promises to fulfil. The book design has to perform a balancing act. On the one hand, it must fit into the genre – with the associated expectations about reception. On the other hand, it has to diverge from the genre strikingly enough to attract the attention of potential buyers. In short, it needs to be perceived as an individual product within the genre, whose exterior (also) constitutes a promise about its content. These three different ways in which book design can create meaning – the indexicalization of the production context, the conventionalization of genre indicators, and the relation of similarity between the cover design and the book text – have many points of overlap. The depiction of swords on the front cover can be part of a conventionalized arsenal of representation and simultaneously signify an iconic relationship of illustration with the preferred weapon of the characters. Often the forms of semiosis are conflated in the reality of the book market and can only be separated under analysis.

In order to be able to analyse the elements of cover design and the overall impression arising from them, I suggest differentiating between various levels of book design, following the approach of Stefan, Rothfos and Westerfeld (2006: 285–289). The pictorial level, with its visual and graphic elements, takes up considerable space and is therefore of high importance for the design of the front cover. It is not only the subject of the image that is critical here. The nature of the representation (e.g. photography, image, design) also proves to be »indicative of the content and mood« of the book (ibid.: 286). The textual level encompasses nearly every type of wording found on the front cover. The author's name and title are obviously prominent elements, but this level also includes other paratexts such as genre attributions. But since the text is only one component of the front cover design and interacts with im-

ages, Gérard Genette's concept of paratext (1992), which also includes all the paratexts inside the book, does not seem very useful here. It does not allow a nuanced analysis of the overall design concept and the resulting overall impression.

Two further levels must be distinguished from the textual level: the publisher level and the marketing level. The former includes the name of the publisher and the company logo, as well as elements that can be attributed to a specific house style, or that occupy predefined positions, such as the ISBN or the barcode. As these elements also consist partly of text, they have to be differentiated from the textual level actively. The same can be said about the marketing level, which also combines textual and visual elements. These, however, have a clear advertising function – to spectacularly highlight the book's (potential) popularity – and therefore differ from the textual level. ›Second-order popularizations‹ are part of the marketing level. They can be quantitative in nature, e.g. pointing out how many people have already purchased the book. In Germany this is frequently achieved with a sticker indicating that the book has made it to the *Spiegel* magazine's list of bestselling books (cf. Werber et al. 2023: 12).⁷ Or they can be qualitative, e.g. quotations from well-known literary critics or popular Fantasy authors singing the book's praises. The overall picture conveyed by the various design elements on these different levels can be considered on an overarching conceptual level. This makes it possible to assess to what extent the whole transcends its parts, and what overall impression is created by the syntagmatic organization of the cover design. The idea is that differentiating between these levels will help to identify the ›anatomy of a cover design‹ (Stefan et al. 2006: 285) and to clarify how meaning is generated in a specific case.

2. A Short History of the Cover Design of Epic Fantasy Literature (in Germany)

Within genres or subgenres, family resemblances in book design show which books belong together. Yet the design of book covers is highly culture- and time-specific and undergoes changes both over time and between countries or cultural communities. Trends dissipate, and design conventions as a whole change and influence the visual appearance of book displays. Despite and because of this relativity, it is possible to identify characteristics and developments in the design of Epic Fantasy. These can be followed across various phases, as will be outlined below with a focus on the front cover. This will allow us to trace the development of cover design in Fantasy

7 ›Second-order popularization instead refers to practices in popularization that create popularity by determining and highlighting the fact that something already has received much attention. This occurs through the publication of quantified frameworks for displaying popularity, such as charts, rankings, and lists‹ (Werber et al. 2023: 12).

literature in Germany. I will concentrate on four representative examples: the front covers of popular Fantasy series by George R.R. Martin (*A Song of Ice and Fire*), Andrzej Sapkowski (*The Witcher*), Bernhard Hennen (*The Elven*) and Markus Heitz (*The Dwarves*).⁸

The first phase of cover design runs to around the turn of the millennium. This includes, for example, the cover designs for George R.R. Martin's Fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire*, which was published in Germany (as *Das Lied von Eis und Feuer*) by Goldmann in the 1990s and later by Blanvalet. All the front covers in the series have a large illustration with a high-contrast colour scheme, combining an archaic-looking background (e.g. medieval-looking buildings or rugged natural landscapes far from civilization) with dynamic action in the foreground (e.g. warriors on horseback, flying dragons). On the cover of the second volume, for example, *Das Erbe von Winterfell* (*The Inheritance of Winterfell*, 1998) (Fig. 1),⁹ a knight swings his axe to ward off a pack of wolves. His depiction is strikingly similar to Conan the Barbarian in the comic series of the same name,¹⁰ and also to popular representations of Attila the Hun (cf. Däumer 2018: 45–64). His body, horse and weapon, all yellow-brown in colour, glow against the background colour scheme, which ranges from violet and pink to ice-blue. It is not possible to draw a link between the illustration and the narrative contained in this volume, since Khal Drogo, the character that this warrior most closely resembles, never fights against the direwolves of the icy north. The same goes for the cover illustrations of the rest of the series. They evoke links to the Middle Ages, by depicting architecture and equipment feature that can be perceived as medieval, but allow no relation of similarity to be drawn with the plot narrated in the books. On the textual level, the cover design of the second volume gives the title visual precedence over the author's name, which appears at the top edge, and the series title, which is placed at the bottom edge of the picture. The texts appear on a background resembling a gold plaque. On the publisher level, the Goldmann logo appears discreetly outside the thin, gold frame of the illustration. The only element on the marketing level is a price sticker, applied later and with little sensitivity to the image composition.

8 It is only possible to draw tentative links between this and the overall development of book design, as this would require a more extensive analysis of a larger body of material.

9 This does not correspond to the second volume in English, as the German edition divides the first English volume into two books.

10 This is confirmed by the results of a search for ›Conan‹ on the search platform cover-browser.com (cf. Cover Browser, online).

Fig. 1: George R.R. Martin: *Das Erbe von Winterfell*. First German edition. Munich 1998

Fig. 2: Andrzej Sapkowski: *Das Schwert der Vorsehung*. First German edition. Munich 1998.



The prominence of the illustration in the front cover design can also be seen in the second volume of the *Witcher* series by Andrzej Sapkowski, *Das Schwert der Vorsehung* (1998; published in English as *Sword of Destiny*) (Fig. 2). It shows an adventus scene, separated by a frame from a neutral background. In front of a mountain landscape, a man and a woman – who can perhaps be vaguely associated with Geralt and Ciri – ride towards a figure waiting outside a city wall. The figure's staff and hat seem to suggest associations with a sorcerer. An additional element of the front cover design is a panorama, also enclosed in a frame, showing the silhouette of a mountain range and a dragon flying over it. The title, author name and series title are organized in the same way as on Martin's book. In this first phase of cover design, the focus is on an opulent, often high-contrast cover illustration, its dynamic scenery separated from a non-specific background by a frame. The images only evoke vague links – if any – to the books' characters and plot. The textual level, often in gold lettering, is integrated into this cover illustration and draws the eye to the book title first of all.¹¹

11 Another example is the almost iconic cover design of Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* (German translation: *Die Nebel von Avalon*) (e.g. in the 1983 edition published by Krüger). Amidst a landscape of forest and mist, it shows a proud horsewoman carrying a shining sword. Above it, the prominent title appears in a golden-yellow frame.

Fig. 3: Bernhard Hennen: *Elfenwinter*. Original edition. Munich 2006.

Fig. 4: Markus Heitz: *Die Zwerge*. Original edition. Munich 2004.



The vague display of a certain ›medievalness‹¹² in the book design becomes more specific and focused in the 2000s. We can therefore describe this period as the second phase. As shown by the front cover designs of Bernhard Hennen's *Elfenwinter* (2006, Fig. 3, published in English as *Elven Winter*) and Markus Heitz's *Die Zwerge* (2004, Fig. 4, published in English as *The Dwarves*), the panoramas give way to smaller image details, which are unframed and spread across the whole front cover. These focus on objects – often weapons –, which can be perceived as some sort of medieval, while the backgrounds show glimpses of mystical-archaic natural landscapes or architecture.¹³ The axe and sword are highlighted by numerous points of light,

12 On the one hand ›Medievalness‹ can be understood as a strategy of displaying objects, tropes and motives that match with the popular knowledge of the medieval. On the other it also has to be conceptualised as a reception category, because the strategies try to create a felt authenticity for the recipients (Velten/Specht 2024).

13 The cover design of Stan Nicholls's *Die Orks* (2002, Heyne Verlag, translation of *Orcs: First Blood*) shows a castle in a rocky landscape in the distant background. The axe depicted in the foreground is, apart from a change in colour scheme, virtually identical to the one on the front cover of *Die Zwerge*. This example shows that design elements were often used more than once in this phase, presumably for financial reasons. Once Fantasy had become established as

which give the weapons a metallic lustre and show up their ornamentation. The lustre corresponds to the colour scheme of the titles on the textual level: at Heyne and Piper, titles in the Fantasy category from this period are almost always in gold. In comparison, the author's name is much smaller and is usually placed to one side above the title, while the name of the publisher and the genre descriptor are positioned discreetly at the edges of the front cover. The cover design evolves from a vague scenery towards a fixation on neomedieval objects, highlighted by points of light and a metallic shine.

Fig. 5: Andrzej Sapkowski: *Das Erbe der Elfen*. New edition. Munich 2019

Fig. 6: Bernhard Hennen: *Die Elfen*. New edition. Munich 2014.



This fixation on objects continues in the third phase, beginning in the 2010s, during which backgrounds are gradually completely eliminated and replaced by expanses of colour or of material creating an impression of parchment,¹⁴ stone or metal – as in Sapkowski's *Hexer* (*Witcher*) (2019; Fig. 5). In the case of Bernhard

a popular genre on the German book market, partly thanks to authors such as Heitz, Hennen and Nicholls, such exact reproductions of images more or less disappeared.

14 See the cover designs of the German editions of Martin's series *A Song of Ice and Fire*, which have been published by blanvalet since 2010.

Hennen's *Die Elfen* (2014, Fig. 6, published in English as *The Elven*), all that remains is an expanse of colour. This suppression of imagery in the design of the background focuses the gaze on the objects in the centre, which become larger and more richly detailed. Points of lustre, embossing and foil coating make handling the book a multisensory experience; an example is the 2019 cover of Sapkowski's *Erbe der Elfen* (published in English as *Blood of Elves*), shown below. This third phase constitutes, for the time being, the end of this evolution of book cover design, from paintings to extremely detailed designs combined with flat backgrounds. The latter now encompass the whole cover (front cover – spine – back cover), making the design of the cover much more unified. The textual level and publisher level are no longer separate and are now integrated into the pictorial level. The result is an overall conception that also increases the book's »online compatibility«, optimizing the commodity for digital distribution channels (Wiling 2021b: 16). For online commerce, cover designs must be clearly structured and easy to recognize even when reduced to a very small size (ibid.: 16–19).

At the beginning of the evolution traced above, the lack of connection between the cover design and the narrative showed that the cover barely functioned as a secondary sign system. Now, however, the swords of the elven, the coats of arms of the Westerosi dynasties and the amulets of the witchers – all important components of each narrative – are given concrete visual form. Thanks to these relations of similarity, the book cover now generates meaning to a much greater extent than in the 1990s. A crucial part of this is that the cover design is governed by the neomedieval – the eclectic, transformative – style in which the novels use medieval components from society, culture and literature.

3. A Neomedieval Aesthetics of the Image and the Book

It has become clear that the cover design of popular Epic Fantasy is becoming more holistic, that it builds up meaning through relations of similarity, and that its focus is on the staging of »medievalness«. This can be observed in more detail when we study the anatomy of a specific cover: the first volume of the *Zwerge* (*Dwarves*) series by Markus Heitz, in the 2016 edition (Fig. 7). The front cover of the 2004 edition, also published by Piper, already shows an axe which appears to have been driven into the grass beneath it. Flames leap up from the shaft of the axe and seem to devour the monstrous chimera above it. The title is printed in golden letters above the image, and the author's name appears in much smaller silver letters above the title.

Fig. 7: Markus Heitz: *Die Zwerge*. Unabridged paperback edition. Munich 2016.



Although the 2016 front cover shows a double-headed axe (labrys) as well, there have been substantial changes. On the pictorial level, the centre is entirely occupied by the axe, with its detailed ornamentation. The black background is slightly lighter around the axe, giving the impression that it is illuminated by the weapon's lustre. The shaft and blades of the axe are decorated with an intricate design in gleaming gold, with similar details in glossy black on the blades. The polished cutting edges of the axe show indentations, which can be interpreted either as signs of wear on the blade or decorative runes. The bottom end of the shaft is a knob with two small hooks sticking out of it. Overall, the wealth of detail on the labrys defines the whole front cover design and highlights its extreme artificiality. Embossed elements on the cover make all these details – from the shine to the structure of the ornamentation – a multisensory experience. The activation of multiple senses ensures a sensory coding in the brain, which intensifies the effect of the book's physical form (cf. Maisch/Herbst 2009: 165).

On the front cover, embossing as well accentuates the author's name and the title, which dominate the centre of the textual level. The size ratio between the author's name and the title has been reversed in comparison to the 2004 edition. The author's name, printed in large, silver letters, defines the lower half of the front cover. His first name and surname enclose the much smaller title, which reflects the gold colouring of the axe's ornamentation. On the publisher level, the Piper logo appears at the top right-hand edge of the front cover and is adapted in a way that doesn't clash with the colour scheme of the cover design – a common problem in the covers from the first

phase. For the display in the bookshop the familiar red ›Spiegel Bestseller‹ sticker is added to the front cover, often right next to the shaft of the axe. This is second-order popularization, serving to highlight the book's popularity and thus attract more attention (cf. Werber et. al. 2023: 10–14). In this case the overall conception of the front cover design also means that there is enough space for the later addition of such second-order popularizations, so that they fit homogeneously into the overall impression rather than disrupting it, as in the awkwardly placed price sticker on the above-mentioned volume by Martin. This tendency to leave space for subsequent proofs of popularity when designing the cover can also be observed in many other cover designs in popular Fantasy literature, including the *Witcher* series.

The 2016 German edition of the first volume of Heitz's *Dwarves* series demonstrates – particularly in comparison with the previous edition of 2004 – the increasing fixation of Fantasy book design on equipment features, that can be perceived as medieval while their depiction is combined with modern aesthetics. The choice of the object is not random. By selecting the axe and its design, the front cover generates meaning in several respects. It corresponds to the title and refers to genre conventions of Fantasy. Not only have dwarves undisputedly been one of the population groups of secondary Fantasy worlds since Tolkien, if not before, but the axe is well known to be their weapon of choice: »Gimli the Dwarf alone wore openly a shirt of steel rings, for Dwarves make light of burdens, and in his belt was a broad bladed axe« (Tolkien 2019: 364). The secondary sign of the book design generates meaning by referring to conventionalized genre attributions and stores of knowledge, and by updating and illustrating them. The prominence of the author's name is also part of this ›secondary process of semanticization‹ (cf. Fleuster 2022: 59). Markus Heitz's two Fantasy series (*The Dwarves*, *The Legends of the Álfar*) are not only very popular, but were also among the first original German-language works in the Fantasy market, and helped to make the genre popular in German-language literature after the commercial success of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* films. Heitz's popularity is therefore used for advertising purposes. The front cover design presents him as a central representative of the genre. His name is both a statement about the book's genre and a promise of quality, and thus has a similar function to well-known and respected brand names (cf. D'Astous 2006: 135f.; Phillips 2007: 24–26). Ultimately, the author's fame and the displaying of this fame are one of the decisive selling points of a book, alongside the cover (cf. Clement et al. 2008: 769). In the case of Markus Heitz, the cover design indexicalizes not only his popularity, but also the product and market contexts of the Fantasy genre. The privileging of the author's name over the title is matched by the less obtrusive publisher level. While well-known publishers such as Suhrkamp or Diogenes often emphasize their own identity with distinctive cover designs, the Piper logo, integrated into the colour scheme of the front cover, is much more discreet.

Besides these conventionalized attributions and stores of knowledge, which refer to the genre and to Tolkien's works as its founding texts, the cover design generates meaning with the image of the axe because it initializes a relation of similarity between the book cover and the text. The quest of Heitz's protagonist Tungdil Goldhand, which is narrated in the first volume, consists mainly of gathering the necessary components to forge a battle axe. This axe is required to eliminate the evil sorcerer Nod'önn (Nudin), who is threatening the peoples of the Geborgenes Land (Sheltered Land). »The blade of this axe must be made of the purest, hardest steel, with diamonds encrusting the bit and an alloy of every known precious metal filling the inlay and the runes. The spurs should be hewn from stone and the haft sculpted from wood of the sigurdaisy tree. The ax must be forged in a furnace lit with the fiercest of all flames and its name shall be Keenfire« (Heitz 2009: 331–332). True, the axe depicted on the front cover is not a battle axe, and the diamond-encrusted bit is missing, but an astonishing number of the distinguishing features of Keenfire appears in this labrys – even the black metal known as tionium, used for decoration.¹⁵

Thus the book design not only depicts a weapon that can be perceived as medieval, but gives centre stage to a powerful medieval like object. When it comes to creating this relation of similarity between the inside and outside of the novel, the divergences between them are negligible. The book presents itself on the tables of bookshops with Keenfire, the axe that Tungdil must forge to complete his quest. This shows that the book cover as a secondary sign, while not delivering any meaning that changes the novel, has a significant role in framing it.

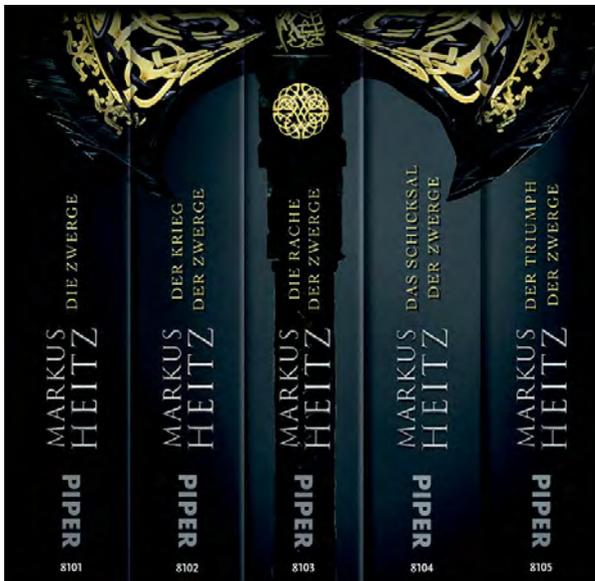
A look at the back cover confirms the assumption that, in the case of Heitz's *Dwarves*, the secondary sign of the book cover generates its meaning primarily through relations of similarity and conventionalization. Not only is the double-headed axe of the front cover depicted again, but a flail in the same design is added. This weapon then dominates the front cover of the third volume of the series in this edition. On the textual level, we read: »They are the toughest heroes from J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*: dwarves are small, bearded, and seem to be born with the ability to swing an axe. But how does a dwarf really live, think and fight?« (Heitz 2016: back cover). Here a careful balance is maintained between positioning Heitz's works within the history of the genre and emphasizing their innovation. The paratext suggests that Heitz's novels are direct successors of Tolkien and, at the same time, offer new insights into the neomedieval world of the dwarves. While the *Spiegel* sticker is only added to the cover design after production (though its position seems to have been planned in the overall conception of the design), the paratext of the back cover also refers to Markus Heitz's ›bestselling saga‹ and spectacularly highlights the popularity of the series and the author. The term ›saga‹ is typical

15 »Dragon Fire [the forge in which Keenfire must be forged; TS] was powerful enough to melt tionium, the black element created by Tion« (Heitz 2009: 335).

of the genre and is used to refer to an extensive Epic Fantasy series (ibid.). The semanticizing processes of the front cover thus continue on the back cover. At the same time, they are concretized: the indirect references to the genre and Tolkien are echoed and explicitly formulated on the textual level.

The spine of the book also plays an important role for the cover design, in two respects: not only does it enable the product to attract attention on the shelves of bookshops; it also represents the book on the bookshelf at home. For series, the spines of the individual volumes and their design are of particular relevance, as the spine design serves to promote or present the books collectively. In some cases, the cover design extends beyond the individual volume and reveals a ›series anatomy‹. This occurs when design features are repeated or varied, thus presenting the series – in terms of book aesthetics – as a cohesive oeuvre. The design of the individual volumes differs in the details, but the overall conception – the interaction between the pictorial, textual, publishing and marketing levels – remains constant. For the *Dwarves* series, this means that the fixation and focusing on a object, that is assumed to be somehow medieval, remains. In the following volumes the double-headed axe is replaced by a hammer (volume 2) and a flail (volume 3). The weapons always have the same shiny, black-gold design as the labrys. The textual, publishing and marketing levels do not change their distribution on the front or back cover.

Fig. 8: Markus Heitz: *Die Zwerge*. 4 volumes. Munich 2016.



Besides this design framework, which clearly shows that the volumes belong together as a series, the design of the spines ensures that the series can be recognized as such when standing on a bookshelf. In the case of *Dwarves*, the book spines, when placed next to each other, show the bottom half of the double-headed axe from the front cover of the first volume (Fig. 8). A section of this image takes up the top half of each book spine, while the title and author's name appear below this in a similar size ratio to the front cover. The 2019 German edition of Andrzej Sapkowski's *Witcher* series follows a comparable principle: when lined up, the books' spines show a witcher's amulet in the centre, with its glossy metallic tendrils stretching out to the beginning and end of the series.

Yet normally such a series anatomy is an indication of the canonization of works or authors as part of high culture. Or it may be the distinguishing feature of a prestigious publishing house. An example of this is the *edition suhrkamp* design by Willy Fleckhaus, which – according to the publisher's homepage – gives the series »cult status« (Suhrkamp|Insel Verlag: edition suhrkamp series). By adopting specific series anatomies, popular (Fantasy) literature is appropriating the aesthetic design principles of high culture. A literary genre that high culture has long viewed as ›trash‹ or ›throwaway literature‹ is popularizing a signum of high-culture book aesthetics and – in the area of series design – blurring the boundaries between ›high‹ and ›low‹. Thus, a structural similarity between popular and high culture can be observed on the level of book design (of series). John Fiske (1992) identified a comparable structural similarity regarding the acquisition of capital in fan communities.

At the same time, the series anatomy also resembles popular culture formats which appear in series.¹⁶ One example from German culture is the ›BRAVO-Starschnitt‹: for several decades, the teen magazine *Bravo* published segments of a life-size image of a singer or film star, which readers could collect and paste together. Another example are the Donald Duck pocket books (known in Germany as the *Lustige Taschenbücher*). In both cases, buyers who purchase every issue are rewarded by the emergence of a complete picture on the bookshelf. This encourages practices of popular collecting. On the one hand, it offers a record of what one has bought and/or read (documentary collecting); on the other hand, it highlights the aesthetic experience of this activity (aesthetic collecting) (see Nast 2017: 292–303). Thanks to an overall aesthetic concept, products that might previously have disappeared under the bed or been discarded as ›trivial‹ literature now become fit for presentation on the buyer's bookshelf.

16 The relevance of seriality and the resulting impetus for collecting become particularly apparent, as Mirjam Nast (Nast 2017: 303–306) demonstrates looking at the extremely long-running series *Perry Rhodan*, a popular series of Hefromane (small-format, cheaply produced paperbacks, similar to penny dreadfuls or dime novels).

The design of the double-headed axe thus becomes the signum of Heitz's series. The potential for secondary semanticization offered by the labrys, which includes conventionalized genre attributions and references and relations of similarity to the narrative, is exploited – in terms of the aesthetics of the book – for the design of the whole series. When it comes to ›long-distance effect‹ – for example on a customer strolling through the bookshop – it is primarily Keenfire that draws attention and attracts the wandering gaze (cf. Scheifele 2020: 11). The author's name and the title will only be discernible on closer inspection. Thus the labrys, referring to the genre, its founding father Tolkien as well as to the weapon's own power in Heitz's novel, becomes the defining design element for the anatomy of the series and its presentation on the shelf.

4. The Fantasy Novel as a Neomedieval Commodity

Like other genres, the book design of popular Fantasy is marked by striking family resemblances. In a book market characterized by quality uncertainty and almost endless choice, these resemblances offer points of orientation and promises for buyers. In the area of Fantasy, such family resemblances often find expression in dark colour schemes and depictions of gleaming objects that can be perceived as medieval. Although design conventions change over time, the use of neomedieval elements has been a feature of the German Fantasy book market from the beginning. These objects are either attributed to the Middle Ages or can be perceived as medieval. They include architectural structures such as castles or city walls, and equipment features or weapons associated with knights, such as swords, lances or axes. They have been part of the pictorial level from the start, but over the different phases of Fantasy book design they have become more and more central, and have superseded cover illustrations showing whole panoramas and movements. The evolution from painting to design also means that expansive background images have been replaced by plain expanses of colour or the simulation of natural materials (e.g. stone, parchment). On the pictorial level, this focus on objects, that somehow refer to the medieval but are designed according to modern aesthetics, makes it possible to create elaborate designs for the objects depicted. The overall concept that emerges helps to attract buyers' attention in the bookshop and also facilitates the digital distribution of the product, where the front cover must be easy to decipher even in thumbnail size on the screen.

Its design turns the book cover into a secondary sign system, which does not change the meaning of the primary sign system of the novel but adds meanings to it. These frame the use and reading of the novel and are often the reason why it is purchased or read in the first place. Using the first volume of Markus Heitz's *Dwarves* series as an example, we have seen that this meaning is generated in dif-

ferent ways. Firstly, the double-headed axe in the centre of the front cover design generates meaning as a neomedieval object symbol: evoking a reference structure made up of dwarves, axes and Tolkien, the cover design adopts conventionalized genre attributions and refers to genre-constituting stores of knowledge. These visual and textual references on both the front and back cover position Heitz's novel as a successor of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, while simultaneously presenting *Dwarves* as an independent contribution to the Epic Fantasy genre. Secondly, the centrality of the labrys – a key object for the diegesis and the quest structure of the novel – in the design of the front cover and of the series creates a meaningful relation of similarity between the cover and the text. The cover design of the *Dwarves* volume is characterized by a neomedieval visual aesthetics. This has a major influence on its secondary processes of semanticization and is therefore expanded into a series design. The design principle thus evolves into a neomedieval aesthetics of the book. The secondary sign system of the book cover is, in the case of Markus Heitz's novel, a particularly neomedieval secondary sign system.

Furthermore, the series design of popular Fantasy identifies individual volumes as parts of a larger oeuvre, and uses features of book design that are actually associated with high culture. At the same time the image running across the books' spines, requiring the full series for completion, encourages popular practices of aesthetic collecting. The presentation of such a collection can then serve to acquire cultural capital. The Fantasy novel is identified as an appealing and noteworthy consumer item in terms of the aesthetics of the book. An integral component of this aesthetic of the book is a neomedieval one. The cover design offers a sophisticated presentation, and at the same time a tactile experience, of these elements. Thus, the emphasis on the medieval, which is detached from its original context and combined with a modern design proves to be an important marketing strategy for Epic Fantasy, which simultaneously raises its status in popular culture. A product that is noticed by many is given an elaborate aesthetic design, identifying it as a neomedieval product. Its status is then further emphasized by second-order popularizations. The Fantasy novel thus becomes a holistically designed commodity whose appropriation and transformation of medieval inventories and narratives can be discerned not only on the level of the primary sign system, but also on that of the secondary sign system. The aesthetics of the book, as shown in these examples of Epic Fantasy, are the connecting point between book design and book text, and play a key role in transforming the novel into a fully neomedieval commodity.

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Illustrations

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