

# Ecologies of the Imagination

## Theorizing the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic

Per Israelson

Academic dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Literature at Stockholm University to be publicly defended on Wednesday 14 June 2017 at 10.00 in Auditoriet, Humanistvillan, Frescativägen 24.

### Abstract

This book is about the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic. In it, the author argues that the definition of the fantastic presented by Tzvetan Todorov in 1970 can be used, provided it is first adapted to a media-ecological framework, to theorize the role of aesthetic participation in the creation of secondary worlds. Working within a hermeneutical tradition, Todorov understands reader participation as interpretation, in which the creative ambiguities of the literary object are primarily epistemological. However, it is here argued that the aesthetic object of the fantastic is also characterized by material ambiguity.

The purpose of this dissertation is then to present a conceptual framework with which to theorize the relation between the material and the epistemological ambiguity of the fantastic. It is argued that such a framework can be found in an ecological understanding of aesthetic participation. This, in turn, entails understanding human subjectivity as a process always already embodied in a material environment. To this extent, the proposed theoretical framework questions the clear and oppositional distinction between form and matter, as well as that between mind and body, nature and culture, and human and non-human, on which a modern and humanist notion of subjectivity is based. And in this sense, the basic ecological assumptions of this dissertation are posthumanist, or non-humanist. From this position, it is argued that an ecological understanding of participation offers a means to reformulate the function of a number of concepts central to studying the aesthetics of the fantastic, most notably the concepts of media, genre and text. As the fantastic focuses on the creation of other worlds, it is an aesthetics of coming into being, of *ontogenesis*. Accordingly, it will be argued that the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic *operationalizes* the ontogenesis of media, genres and texts.

By mapping the ontogenesis of three distinct media ecologies – the media ecology of fantasy and J. R. R. Tolkien's secondary world Middle-earth; the media ecology of the American comic book superhero *Miracleman*; and the media ecology of William Blake – this book argues that the ecological imagination generates world.

Per Israelson has been a doctoral candidate in the Research School of Studies in Cultural History at the department of Culture and Aesthetics, Stockholm University. *Ecologies of the Imagination* is his dissertation.

**Keywords:** *Media theory, genre theory, media ecology, posthumanism, ecocriticism, neocybernetics, sympoiesis, ontogenesis, fantasy, the fantastic, comic books, William Blake, Alan Moore, J. R. R. Tolkien.*

Stockholm 2017

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:su:diva-142205>

ISBN 978-91-7649-756-2  
ISBN 978-91-7649-757-9



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ISBN print 978-91-7649-756-2

ISBN PDF 978-91-7649-757-9

Printed in Sweden by Universitetservice US-AB, Stockholm 2017

Distributor: Department of Culture and Aesthetics

# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments .....	5
<b>Introduction: <i>Los Caprichos</i> and the Ecological Fantastic .....</b>	<b>7</b>
At the end of the mind: Print 43, “El sueño de la razón produce monstruos” .....	8
Purpose of the dissertation .....	10
Tzvetan Todorov’s definition of the fantastic .....	11
Material participation .....	12
Modern subjectivity .....	13
Ambiguous perception .....	15
Material and cultural environment: assemblage and ontogenesis .....	17
Distributed perception: sympoiesis .....	20
Media-ecological definition of the fantastic .....	23
Time of the Carnival: play and the fantastic .....	24
The ecological fantastic .....	27
The argument .....	30
<b>Chapter 1: <i>The Unwritten</i>, Writing a Media Ecology of the Fantastic .....</b>	<b>34</b>
1. The Whale: Media as Ecosystems .....	36
Participation and embodiment .....	40
Autopoiesis .....	41
Neocybernetics .....	44
Feedback and control: the structural coupling of <i>The Unwritten</i> .....	47
Affect: perception-event .....	50
The mingled senses of embodied perception .....	53
Sympoiesis: the structural coupling of ecosystems .....	55
Vibrant matter: the (magical) agency of objects .....	58
Media ecologies: world-creating feedback .....	59
Sympoiesis and the aesthetics of media ecologies .....	63
The Role of the Reader: Iser, Eco, Barthes .....	64
Ontogenesis: creating ecosystems .....	68
2. Theories of the Fantastic: the Ecosystems of Genre .....	70
Participatory genres .....	70
Tommy Taylor and genre .....	72
Todorov and structuralism .....	74

Kathryn Hume: departure from consensus reality .....	76
Brian Attebery: fantasy as mode, genre and formula .....	78
Farah Mendlesohn: rhetorics of fantasy .....	79
Nancy Traill: fictional worlds theory .....	79
Rosemary Jackson: art as subversion .....	80
José Monleón: art as false consciousness .....	81
The ethico-aesthetic function of the fantastic as a hermeneutical concept .....	83
Mark Bould: the hailing of the fantastic .....	84
The postmodern fantastic: Lucy Armit and Brian McHale .....	85
3. Participatory texts .....	89
Fantastic narrative .....	89
Metalepsis .....	91
Configurative textuality .....	94
Archontic textuality .....	99
The secret in the wall: hypericon and metapicture .....	102
Ekphrasis .....	105
4. The return of the whale .....	108
<b>Chapter 2: The Media Ecology of Middle-earth .....</b>	<b>113</b>
Note on the text: the materiality of genre .....	113
Foreword: paperback Tolkien and popular publishing .....	117
Prologue: monsters against allegory .....	119
Secondary belief and faërian drama .....	121
1. On the names of Blue Wizards .....	125
2. The mythic method .....	134
3. Children of the <i>Legendarium</i> .....	139
The Children of Húrin .....	141
Adaptation and Innovation .....	142
4. Pirate configurations: unauthorized authors .....	150
Parodies .....	152
Russian Tolkien .....	156
Night of the Nazgûl: the legal limits of play .....	161
5. Vibrant matter: Books, Rings and Things .....	165
Balin's Tomb: the materiality of the book .....	166
The Book of Mazarbul: ontogenesis in the Chamber of Records .....	169
The Book of Mazarbul facsimiles .....	172
Fantastic ekphrasis: mingled senses in the Chamber of Records .....	176
The Ring is the thing: material agency .....	178
The Eye in the Ring: media mixtures and mingled bodies .....	179

6. Ecology and ethics: the exteriority of Tom Bombadil .....	186
Things merely are: the horror of environmentalism .....	189
The Old Forest: environmental ontogenesis .....	195
Lintips: radical exteriority .....	198
<b>Chapter 3: The Many Marvels of Miracleman .....</b>	<b>202</b>
1. Brief history of the American comic book superhero .....	206
Revision and postmodernism .....	209
Metacomics .....	210
2. Comic books and meaning .....	211
Sequence and closure .....	212
Comics as mixed media .....	213
The system of comics: arthrology and braiding .....	214
Cognitive narratology .....	216
Cryptomimesis .....	218
3. Miracleman 3D Special: material-historical context .....	219
Reprint and remediation: historiographic metalepsis .....	222
The multiple origins of Miracleman .....	223
Warrior Magazine .....	224
American syndication: Pacific, Eclipse and Marvel Comics .....	227
Copyright, analogues and multiverses .....	229
4. Immersive media: The Red King Syndrome .....	232
5. Participating media systems .....	238
The abyss: second-order observation .....	239
Catgames: braiding metalepsis .....	242
Olympus: autopoiesis of the superhuman .....	245
6. Configurative identity .....	248
The sixth Andy Warhol: appropriation in the underworld .....	249
Secret identity: the distributed subjectivity of superheroes .....	253
Stasis and ecological crisis: Miracleman at the end of time .....	255
7. The sympoiesis of superheroes .....	258
Captain Marvel .....	259
Captain Britain .....	260
Shazam! .....	263
8. The Original Writer: literature and comic books .....	266
<b>Chapter 4: William Blake and the Six Chambers of Hell .....</b>	<b>270</b>
1. New Frontiers: The Godhead at Rockefeller Center .....	270
The Secret in the Wall 2: The Return of Lenin .....	279

The illuminated book .....	280
Fearful symmetry: modernist systems of mythology .....	282
2. Men in the Form of Books .....	284
Fantastic sympoiesis: the ecological aesthetics of William Blake .....	286
Infernal printing .....	287
The William Blake Archive .....	290
The vortex: embodied knowledge .....	291
Configurative books and men .....	293
Creative perception .....	295
3. Invisible Blake: <i>The Invisibles</i> as a medium of the fantastic .....	297
Parasites: the material of language .....	302
4. Members never before seen: adaptations of the <i>Divine Comedy</i> .....	307
5. Phillip Pullman and the Book of Dust .....	318
Ontogenetic media: the <i>alethiometer</i> .....	321
The media ecology of Dust .....	326
The Republic of Heaven: ecological collective .....	336
6. Building <i>Golgonooza</i> .....	339
<b>Conclusion: Ecologies of the Imagination .....</b>	<b>350</b>
A genre is an ecosystem .....	351
The media ecology of the fantastic .....	353
The material ambiguity of the fantastic .....	354
The ecological imagination: enter the <i>Cthulhucene</i> .....	356

## Acknowledgments

Many agencies have been involved in producing this dissertation. In a sense, this is the autobiography of a distributed subjectivity.

To my two supervisors Anders Cullhed and Jesper Olsson, for their faith and confidence in the project through all its not so apparent twists and turns, as well as for insightful comments and critical readings, I am deeply grateful. I have been, and continue being, thoroughly inspired by our talks.

This book is very much the product of two distinct research environments at Stockholm University: The Research School of Studies in Cultural History (FoKult) and The Department of Culture and Aesthetics (IKE). The seminar at FoKult has been an ongoing creative event since its start in February 2010. While always being an environment characterized by participation and collaboration, on many different levels of distinction, involving not only the 19 PhD students of the school but also the senior members of its “steering committee”, it has perhaps first and foremost been influenced by its research officer, Anna Källén. For all the nudges, pushes and kicks in the butt – intellectual as well as physical – I am ever thankful. Without that roasted meat (lamb or chicken?) some two years ago, this book would not have been written.

To Lisa Ehlin, Niklas Haga, Johan Linder, Matts Lindström, Robin Wahlsten Böckerman and Adam Wickberg Månsson, for inspiring and heated discussions on media theory, cultural history and the tentacular fantastic. To Emma Hagström Molin and Daniel Strand, with whom I have shared so much these last seven years, it is truly mindboggling.

At IKE I have had the fortune to work with fellow PhD students John Björkman, Magnus Bremmer, Axel Englund, Johan Fredrikzon, Hilda Jakobsson, Anna Jungstrand, Anna Jörngården, Ljubica Miocevic, Emma Strindmar Norström and Lydia Wistisen. Thanks also to Christer Johansson for letting me indulge in the popular. To Erik van Ooijen for the weird. And Tobias Dahlkvist for the pathological.

Karin Kukkonen and Jonas Ingvarsson helped this dissertation immensely by providing invaluable criticism when presented at its final seminar. Boel Westin provided sharp suggestions for improvements in the concluding stages of the manuscript. I would also like to thank Polly Hsu, Ann Badlund, Åsa Määki and the rest of the administrative staff. Thanks to SBI and Åsa Warnqvist for lending me space when I most needed it.

To Erik Eldhagen, for letting me adapt our conversations into this thesis, these

are, to a very real degree, your thoughts. To Zoi Santikos, for inviting me into the group for children's literature at the Swedish Arts Council. Without the staggering amount of books we read over the four years in the group, I am not sure I would have been so confident theorizing aesthetic participation. To Kristin Hallberg, for welcoming me to the group for criticism of children's literature at *Svenska Dagbladet*. It was writing literary criticism and criticism of comic books that first got me to thinking about the media ecologies of the fantastic.

The final work on this dissertation was done at Färgkontoret. To my roommates in the corner office, Jakob Lien and Sebastian Tornngren Wartin, for the environmental feedback and putting up with my groans and giggles. To Wallenbergstiftelsens Stipendiefond and Vitterhetsakademien for supplying funds for travels.

To my family. To my sister, for reading comics together with me, reminding me that I was not alone. To Daniel, for his enormous patience with the production of this book. To my father, who I know would have stood by me, now, as he always did. To my mother, who showed me how to read the fantastic and whose strength and moral certitude has always been a guide.

Last, and always, to Gabriella, for teaching me the art of sleep and dream, and Otto and Fredrika, you are, in every conceivable way, the ecologies of my imagination.



## Introduction:

# *Los Caprichos* and the Ecological Fantastic



Figure 1. *Los Caprichos*, Plate 1, Self-portrait of Goya

On 6 February 1799 a notice in the *Diario de Madrid* advertised the sale of “A collection of Prints of Capricious Subjects, Invented and Etched by Don Francisco Goya.”<sup>1</sup> The collection, consisting of 80 etchings, was printed and bound and sold under the title *Los Caprichos* (“The Caprices”) in a shop purveying alcoholic beverages near the center of Madrid. It did not do well, and having sold only some twenty copies of the book, most of them to patrons already devoted to his art, Goya deposited the plates and the remaining print run with the royal printing house in the capital.<sup>2</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> “Collection the estampas de asuntos caprichosos, inventadas y grabadas al agua fuerte, por Don Francisco Goya.” translation by J. Lopez-Rey, Victor Ieronim Stoichita and Anna Maria Coderch, *Goya: The Last Carnival*, (London: Reaktion, 1999), p 288

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Schulz, *Goya's Caprichos: aesthetics, perception and the body* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p ?

reasons for the lack of commercial success could only be speculated, but certainly the subject matter of *Los Caprichos* might have appeared offensive to parts of the local bourgeoisie (though that need not, of course, have affected its commercial appeal), and the price was quite steep, but the relative novelty of the medium should also be taken in consideration: a book-length collection of prints, apparently comprising a coherent series, a narrative of sorts. It was published at a point in history when print technology, with the comparatively recent invention of aquatint and lithography, had made considerable progress, both in expression and production, and when collections of prints had an increasingly important function in the construction and dissemination of the cultural identities of European nation states. Nevertheless, the material medium of *Los Caprichos* must have seemed an oddity. As much, perhaps, as the disquieting weirdness of its subject matter. And it would appear that the media specific materiality of *Los Caprichos* is still, after two centuries of canonization, somewhat of an oddity, at least from an academic and critical perspective, in the sense that it has been largely overlooked. As has, for that matter, the relation between the medium of *Los Caprichos* and the fantastic character of the supernatural story-world it establishes.

It is precisely this relation that is the subject of the present study: the intimate connection between the material medium and the fantastic. To this extent, *Los Caprichos* embodies – in the most literal fashion – the core argument of this thesis, namely that the aesthetics of the fantastic emerges with the environment of the medium.

### **At the end of the mind: Print 43, “El sueño de la razón produce monstruos”**

The 80 prints of *Los Caprichos* insert supernatural imagery into everyday situations of late 18<sup>th</sup>-century bourgeois Spanish society, thematizing, by an iconography of madness, dream and the monstrous, the limits of sensation and experience. Grotesquely distorted figures, anthropomorphized animals and creatures from European myth and legend, witches, goblins, giants, demons, intrude upon the realm of empirical reality. The critical reaction to these often disturbing images, throughout their history of reception, has been to interpret them topically or satirically. References, in both images and captions, to contemporary Spanish society seem to corroborate such an interpretation. On a more general level, *Los Caprichos* has been viewed in the context of 18<sup>th</sup>-century epistemology as an intersection in the debate on sensualism, within the framework of the Spanish Enlightenment. The intrusion of supernatural and mythological imagery into the mundane has accordingly been seen as a critique of an unenlightened and superstitious society.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p 9



Figure 2. *Los Caprichos*, plate 43, “El sueño de la razón produce monstruos”, Madrid, 1799

Print 43, captioned “El sueño de la razón produce monstruos” (“The sleep of reason produces monsters”, Figure 2), is perhaps the clearest example of an intrusion of the supernatural. On the one hand, a series of nocturnal animals seem to appear out of nowhere – an appearance that, while the animals at first glance look normal, would in itself defy rational explanation, given that the room, as indicated by the dress of the figure and the objects on the table, is most probably situated in the real world; on the other hand, the same animal forms, on closer attention, reveal varying degrees of anthropomorphous deformity, with increasingly human-like faces emerging from the background. The owl-like bird, extending what appears to be some instrument of inscription towards the sleeping figure, is perhaps the most salient of such unnatural transformations.

Accordingly, Plate 43 presents the viewer with a hermeneutic ambiguity. It is unclear whether the monstrous animals emerging from behind the back of the sleeping figure are to be interpreted as a product of the dreaming mind, or whether they have an existence of their own beyond the ordering structures of waking reason. This hermeneutic ambiguity has made a lasting impact on the history of the reception of *Los Caprichos*. An unequivocal identification of a Romantic aesthetics during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, presenting Goya as a natural genius imbued with sublime vision, was supplemented in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century by a contextualization of *Los*

*Caprichos* within the framework of the Spanish Enlightenment, interpreting the supernatural imagery as satire of a pre-modern and superstitious worldview. This tension between two epistemological frameworks – Enlightenment and Romanticism – as well as between two contesting notions of artistic creativity corresponds to two different notions of vision operative in *Los Caprichos*: vision as observation and vision as imagination.

Art historian Andrew Schulz argues that the dialectic between these two types of vision problematizes Romantic and Enlightenment aesthetics alike, and as such *Los Caprichos* is located in “the interstices between Neoclassicism and Romanticism”<sup>4</sup>. What characterizes *Los Caprichos* then, according to Schulz, is the manner in which the representation of the supernatural – as the intrusion of monstrous animals behind the back of the sleeping figure in Plate 43 – cannot be considered merely a product of faulty observation, nor is it unequivocally the product of the imagination. Instead, in *Los Caprichos* the ontological character of the supernatural is undecided; it is both a misapprehension of reality and an indication of an alternate reality, alien to ordinary senses. This hermeneutically ambiguous state is further enforced, notes Schulz, by the caption, in which the Spanish “sueño” denotes both dream and sleep, making the monsters at the same time the creation of reason, by reason’s dream, and the inevitable result of reason’s absence.<sup>5</sup> Monsters, at the end of the mind.<sup>6</sup>

## Purpose of the dissertation

However, the ambiguity of *Los Caprichos* is not only limited to an epistemological or hermeneutic level. It is also, as will briefly be sketched in this introduction, a question of a material ambiguity, where the objecthood of *Los Caprichos* imposes on the reader, demanding a material and physical response in which the book of prints functions as part of an extended sensual apparatus. It is the becoming of this material ambiguity, and its relation to an emergent and embodied perception that is the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p 12

<sup>5</sup> José B Monleón sees this paradoxical state, where “two irreconcilable universes face one another” as a threat to “the foundations of Enlightenment”. Interpreting the scene as a dream narrative, this threat dissipates at the moment of waking; nevertheless, it is carried on, argues Monleón, in the “coexistence of two systems in one sign” – the pictorial and the verbal in the etching. José B Monleón *A Specter is Haunting Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p 21, p 44

<sup>6</sup> The paraphrase of Wallace Stevens ‘Of Mere Being’ is not unintentional. In a short, thought-provoking study – *Things Merely Are* (London: Routledge, 2005) – Simon Critchley charts the potential modes with which art – and the poetry of Stevens – can present the naked thingness of existence. Though in no way a work of the fantastic, Stevens’ poem touches upon a subject, albeit in the form of a negation, that will be discussed at some length, that of anthropomorphism. The first two stanzas of the poem read: “The palm at the end of the mind,/Beyond the last thought, rises/In the bronze decor,//A gold-feathered bird/Sings in the palm, without human meaning,/Without human feeling, a foreign song.”

focus of the present investigation. This is where the supernatural storyworlds of the fantastic come into being.

The purpose of this dissertation is then to present a conceptual framework with which to theorize the relation between the material and the epistemological ambiguity of the fantastic. It will be argued that such a framework can be found in an ecological understanding of aesthetic participation. This, in turn, entails understanding perception as a process always already embodied in a material environment. To this extent, the proposed theoretical framework questions the clear and oppositional distinction between form and matter, as well as that between mind and body, nature and culture, and human and non-human, on which a modern and humanist notion of subjectivity is based. And in this sense, the basic ecological assumptions of this dissertation are posthumanist, or non-humanist. From this position, it will be argued that an ecological understanding of participation offers a means to reformulate the function of a number of concepts central to studying the aesthetics of the fantastic, most notably the concepts of media, genre and text. While the validity of these ecological reformulations is not limited to the aesthetics of the fantastic – it is clearly also something that applies to an aesthetics of postmodernism, or a modernist avant-garde, for that matter – it is nevertheless the case, as will be argued throughout this thesis, that an ecological function of media, genres and texts is necessary to the world building of the fantastic. As the fantastic focuses on the creation of other worlds, it is an aesthetics of coming into being, of *ontogenesis*. Accordingly, it will be argued that the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic *operationalizes* the ontogenesis of media, genres and texts.

### **Tzvetan Todorov's definition of the fantastic**

The hermeneutic ambiguity of Plate 43 of Goya's *Los Caprichos* could be seen as emblematic of the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century discourse of the literary fantastic. Still the most influential, albeit far from unquestioned, definition of the fantastic is presented in Tzvetan Todorov's book-length study *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1973). Virtually all theoretical discussions on the fantastic, even those that explicitly disagree with Todorov's notion of fantastic art and literature, take Todorov's study as a point of departure. The present discussion will be no exception.

Todorov's definition of the fantastic is direct and simple. The fantastic, says Todorov, is an evanescent genre, coinciding with that moment of hesitation and uncertainty a reader experiences, when confronted with an unexplainable – and in this sense supernatural – event, as to whether this event is congruent with prevalent consensus reality or would in fact necessitate a new model of reality. The fantastic is accordingly to be understood as a transitory genre, lasting for the duration of a hermeneutic hesitation on part of the reader, vacillating between two interpretational frame-

works. However, no single literary work belongs wholly to the fantastic. Vacillating is ultimately untenable, claims Todorov: “the reader makes a decision even if the character does not; he opts for one solution or the other, and thereby emerges from the fantastic.”<sup>7</sup> To this extent, Todorov’s definition of the fantastic highlights the active role of the reader: “The fantastic therefore implies an integration of the reader into the world of the characters; that world is defined by the reader’s own ambiguous perception of the events narrated.”<sup>8</sup> The construction of a fantastic storyworld hinges on the participation of the reader; the fantastic is a participatory aesthetics. Todorov carefully notes, however, that there is no actual reader in question here, but “the reader implicit in the text.”<sup>9</sup> The actual reader does not participate in the world of the characters more than in an act of interpretation. The fantastic text, as Todorov understands it, could in a sense be described as an extreme case of textual “blanks”, as described by Wolfgang Iser’s reader-response theory.<sup>10</sup> But where Iser’s textual blanks generate closure and meaning, Todorov’s blanks are, at least ideally, suspended in a perpetual state of hermeneutic uncertainty.

## Material participation

Historically, Todorov’s definition of the fantastic concerns a limited range of literary objects, more or less corresponding to a 19<sup>th</sup>-century literary genre of fantastic stories. Accordingly, the definition focuses on the hermeneutic ambiguities produced by discrete narrative segments in which the relation between the real and the supernatural is thematized. Thus, Todorov’s definition explains how the semiotics of the fantastic text functions, as an isolated unity. However, with a slight shift in perspective, the definition can also be applied to the material ambiguities of literary texts. In fact, the hermeneutic ambiguity that Todorov delineates as the heart of the fantastic also points to the materiality of the text, where the narrative structure and the textuality of the text emerges as part of a participatory perception, in which a reader is involved. While Todorov argues that this reader is the implied reader of a certain narrative structure – extant in modern literature – it is nevertheless clear that the affective aspects of his definition also indicates the presence of an embodied reader. As will be argued at some length in Chapter 1, Todorov’s definition can then explain how texts, as well as media and genres, also always involve material participation.

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<sup>7</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: a structural approach to a literary genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975 (1973)), p 41

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p 31

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p 31

<sup>10</sup> “The blanks make the reader bring the story itself to life – he lives with the characters and experiences their activities.” Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: a Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1980), p 192. Iser’s theory will be discussed at some length in Chapter 1.

This approach to aesthetic experience entails an understanding of literature and art – or for that matter, any activity generally associated with the modern cultural field – that does not privilege meaning-production and interpretation as the only means by which such an object interacts with its surroundings. In this sense, the present study is in line with Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s critique of hermeneutics and interpretation. Against the meaning-oriented notion of culture dominated by hermeneutics, Gumbrecht proposes a notion of culture that also focuses on the physical presence of cultural objects. Cultural objects do not merely (if at all) produce meaning, they always also produce presence, says Gumbrecht. This basic fact of communication has, however, been overlooked by a large part of Western cultural history.<sup>11</sup> Aesthetic experience, says Gumbrecht, taking the production of presence into consideration, is characterized by epiphany. It is not an epiphany of understanding or insight, it is not a question of “simultaneity, tension, and oscillation between meaning and presence”; instead, epiphany describes how this tension comes forth as an event, a sudden temporal and spatial presence, seemingly coming out of nothing.<sup>12</sup> This sense of presence is evanescent: “Finally (and above all), epiphany within aesthetic experience is an event because it undoes itself while it emerges.”<sup>13</sup> As will be argued in the following, the fantastic is very much tied to the eventness and material presence of aesthetic experience.

## Modern subjectivity

It would then seem, that the conceptual categories of modernity pose a problem for the understanding of the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic. Bruno Latour’s critique of modernity and analysis of “the modern constitution” will here provide a conceptual framework for situating the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic. Latour delineates two distinct sets of “entirely different practices” at work within modernity, whose relation defines the modern constitution:

The first set of practices, by ‘translation’, creates mixtures between entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture. The second, by ‘purification’, creates two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhumans

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<sup>11</sup> “That any form of communication implies such a production of presence, that any form of communication, through its material elements, will ‘touch’ the bodies of the persons who are communicating in specific and varying ways may be a relatively trivial observation – but it is true nevertheless that this fact had been bracketed (if not – progressively – forgotten) by Western theory building ever since the Cartesian cogito made the ontology of human existence depend exclusively on the movements of the human mind,” Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: what meaning cannot convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p 17

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p 111

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p 113



on the other. Without the first set, the practices of purification would be fruitless or pointless. Without the second, the work of translation would be slowed down, limited, or even ruled out. The first set corresponds to what I have called networks; the second to what I shall call the modern critical stance. The first, for example, would link in one continuous chain the chemistry of the upper atmosphere, scientific and industrial strategies, the preoccupation of heads of state, the anxieties of ecologists; the second would establish a partition between a natural world that has always been there, a society with predictable and stable interests and stakes, and a discourse that is independent of both reference and society.<sup>14</sup>

While Latour points out that the hybrids of mediation – of translations of networks – are rendered unthinkable and unrepresentable by the modern constitution, though simultaneously it is that very constitution that allows for and promulgates the proliferation of hybrids, his project is not about debunking modernity as the false consciousness of moderns.<sup>15</sup> Instead, his argument is in a sense much more radical. The moment both of these two practices are taken into consideration, it is clear, says Latour, that “we have never been modern in the sense of the Constitution”. This insight is not merely a matter of postmodernism replacing modernism as a conceptual framework; rather it enforces a reconfiguration and rereading of history: “No one has ever been modern. Modernity has never begun”, says Latour.<sup>16</sup>

Latour argues that such a reconfiguring of history entails deploying both dimensions of the modern constitution at once. A conceptual figure for this approach is the theory of the quasi-object, a concept Latour borrows from Michel Serres.<sup>17</sup> A quasi-object is an object that encompasses both poles of the modern constitution; it is both of nature and of culture, but without acknowledging an essential difference between the two. It is, in a sense, the milieu in which both subject and object emerge. All objects, and subjects, are quasi-objects, and quasi-subjects, constituted equally by society and nature. Once this fact is acknowledged, it is possible to undertake an investigation of hybrids that does not merely treat hybridity as an intermediary of distinct and essential entities but as an original mediation of an event in itself.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p 10f

<sup>15</sup> “The essential point of this modern Constitution is that it renders the work of mediation that assembles hybrids invisible, unthinkable, unrepresentable. Does this lack of representation limit the work of mediation in any way? No, for the modern world would immediately cease to function. Like all other collectives it lives on that blending. On the contrary (and here the beauty of the mechanism comes to light), *the modern Constitution allows the expanded proliferation of the hybrids whose existence, whose very possibility it denies.*” Ibid., p 34

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p 47

<sup>17</sup> Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p 224f

<sup>18</sup> Latour, 1993, 78



In her book *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), N. Katherine Hayles conceptualizes subjectivity as environmental feedback, stressing the posthuman notion of subjectivity as embodied actuality, rather than as disembodied information. From this position follows a critique of some central aspects of liberal, humanist subjectivity, as it has been conceptualized within modernity, particularly the notions of autonomy and agency.<sup>19</sup> Hayles argues that with a cybernetic understanding of communication information and meaning is always materially grounded, and operates not on the presence/absence axis criticized by deconstruction, but is “located within the dialectic of pattern/randomness”. This does not signal the end of humanity, Hayles notes: “It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice.”<sup>20</sup> Theorizing aesthetic participation as ecological feedback will in the following investigation repeatedly mean criticizing certain aspects of liberal, humanist subjectivity, particularly the notions of autonomy and agency.

### **Ambiguous perception**

The fantastic emerges, as Todorov points out, as a world “defined by the reader’s own ambiguous perception of the events narrated.” But instead of situating this perception in the function of an implied reader – a category whose ad hoc intervention merely seems to add another layer of metaphysics to the modernist notion of literature – the following investigation will focus on how the literary object (and any other cultural object) functions in relation to the sensuous body of an actual reader, in a situated practice. It is precisely here, in an embodied experience, that the ambiguous perception of the fantastic emerges.

Sensual perception is a major theme throughout the 80 prints of *Los Caprichos*. And not only, as has been mentioned earlier, in the form of a dialectic between two different notions of vision, corresponding to the epistemologies of Enlightenment and Romanticism, respectively. The physical sense of sight is repeatedly thematized, focusing on the act of reading, looking and visual scrutiny, but most often as a deprivation of sight, such as blindness, sleep, blindfolding, or by invoking perceptual aids such as spectacles and magnifying glasses.<sup>21</sup> But other senses than sight are profusely referred to as well; particularly taste, in the many prints depicting mouths and scenes of eating, as in Plate 50, “Las Chinchillas” (Figure 3), where attention is brought to the senses of taste and hearing as well as that of sight.

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<sup>19</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p 4

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p 286

<sup>21</sup> Schulz, 2005, p 120



Figure 3: Plate 50, "Las Chinchillas"



Figure 4: Plate 64, "Buen Viaje"

The insistent foregrounding of sensual perception, together with an equally salient emphasis on the distortion of the senses and the human body, inverts and criticizes the hierarchies of the senses upon which traditional Western epistemology is based. This grotesque inversion has, on the one hand, been read as a Romantic critique of the Enlightenment notion of reason and its inability to move beyond its concepts; on the other hand it has been interpreted satirically, as a warning against the monstrous effects of a society not governed by reason.<sup>22</sup> Against a clear-cut, dichotomous interpretation, Andrew Schulz argues that the distorted perceptions staged in *Los Caprichos* intermingle the two different versions of vision – sensory and imaginary – proffered by Enlightenment and Romanticism respectively. The result is one of fantastic liminality.

What is perhaps most important here is that Schulz situates this liminality in relation to the position of the viewer. Commenting on Plate 64, "Buen Viaje" ("Bon Voyage", Figure 4), Schulz notes that the direct gaze of one of the monstrous creatures grounds the supernatural scene in the act of looking: "We hesitate between perception and imagination, held in a state of suspension analogous to the unresolved contradictions embodied by the hybrid creatures found in *Los Caprichos*, as well as by the iconography of grotesque decoration. Thus Goya's prints call into

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p 156

question not only the perceptual and cognitive faculties of represented figures, but also those of the viewer.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Material and cultural environment: assemblage and ontogenesis**

*Los Caprichos* establishes and maintains an ambiguous perception on several levels, not merely in the bodily distortion of the figures depicted. The captions, even disregarding their terse and often enigmatic phrasings, evoke a contrasting semiotic system to that of the images, forcing the relation between image and text into consideration. Grouping together words and images in one semiotic unit is a prominent narrative technique of the fantastic. The hesitation generated by the fantastic could be described, from a semiotic standpoint, as the introduction of two signifying codes in one semiotic unit.<sup>24</sup> Todorov notes that the conflation of figurative language and literal language is often tied to the intrusion of the supernatural; and the 19<sup>th</sup>-century genre of literary ekphrasis, where this tension is explicitly played upon, has been suggested as the dominant mode of the fantastic.<sup>25</sup>

However, the precise relation between images and words, or for that matter, any other signifying system present in *Los Caprichos*, is not primarily what makes it of particular interest to the present investigation. Instead, it is the fact that the prints clearly indicate a distribution of a number of discrete units potentially involved in the experience of viewing/reading that marks it out as important, a number of distinct media systems converging in one material medium. For that reason, it is important to keep in mind that *Los Caprichos* comprises a series of prints, and furthermore a series that is collated and bound together in a particular order. While this order indicates a certain sequence, as of course does the fact that the book has been bound in that order, the sequence does not necessarily correspond to a specific narrative trajectory. In fact, the internal relation between individual plates does not seem to be structured by any narrative sequence at all; it seems more to adhere to a logics of thematic and figurative association. Thus the seemingly arbitrary sequential order of the plates invites alternative ways to connect them. Reading *Los Caprichos* becomes not merely a question of interpreting plates against each other sequentially, or against an overarching interpretation of the collection as a whole; it also stresses the non-arbitrary intervention of the reader connecting plates. And even more im-

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p 186

<sup>24</sup> This is how José Sanjines describes the semiotic function of the neo-fantastic text. José Sanjinés, *Paseos en el horizonte: fronteras semióticas en los relatos de Julio Cortázar* (New York: Lang, 1994), p 76.

<sup>25</sup> Todorov, 1975, p 76. Francois Rigolot argues that ekphrasis could be understood as a fantastic figure, Francois Rigolot, “Ekphrasis and the Fantastic: Genesis of an Aberration”, in *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (Duke University Press, Spring, 1997), pp 97-112

portantly, this intervention is enacted in an environment that is forced upon the reader/viewer by the materiality of the book. The bound prints of *Los Caprichos* resist appropriation, not merely hermeneutically but also physically; the weight of the book and the structure of the paper demand a constant corporeal handling if it is not to close in on itself, the prints literally recessing between the covers. This material resistance, and the sustained corporeal interaction demanded by it, has been partly covered over by the historical treatment of *Los Caprichos* as a material artifact, where the dominant mode has been to isolate individual plates. Few bound copies are extant, and mostly *Los Caprichos* is presented, like the digitized copies used here from the collections in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, as a series of isolated plates, with page numbers and material traces of the binding as the only indications of material context. This does not mean that treating the individual plates in isolation or in conjunction, arranging and rearranging sequences in, for example, a digital environment, does not involve a corporeal effort. To a certain degree, as will be shown in the discussion of the digitization of William Blake's work concluding this thesis; digital environments enforce a corporeally grounded aesthetics.

For the present investigation into the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic, a productive way to describe the specific character of the material and cultural environment in which the ambiguous perception of *Los Caprichos* is situated is by the philosophical concept of the *assemblage*. The notion of the assemblage is primarily associated with the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, presented in some detail in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1908) as a conceptualization of the multiplicity of objects:

An assemblage, in its multiplicity, necessarily acts on semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows simultaneously (independently of any recapitulation that may be made of it in a scientific or theoretical corpus). There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author). Rather, an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders, so that a book has no sequel, nor the world as its object nor one or several authors as its subjects.<sup>26</sup>

As opposed to an entity structured as a unity, limited in space and time by a border or circumference, an assemblage structures meaning-making as an environment, as a location perpetually in-between. To describe the meaning-making processes of an environment, Deleuze and Guattari use the image of the rhizome – a decentral-

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<sup>26</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p 25

ized root-network common to certain plants – as a conceptual metaphor. The rhizome functions as a non-dichotomous alternative to the hierarchical, top to bottom, root-tree metaphor for meaning-production dominating Western metaphysics. A rhizome has no beginning or end but functions as a middle where all points potentially connect. The relations between these points are not fixed positions but “lines of flight”: “Unlike a structure, which is defined by a set of points and positions, with binary relations between the points and biunivocal relationships between the positions, the rhizome is made only of lines”<sup>27</sup>.

Gilbert Simondon’s concept of technical individuation, to which the theory of the assemblage owes an intellectual debt, describes the ontogenesis of coming into being as environmental emergence.<sup>28</sup> This involves, says Simondon, not only machines and technical artifacts, but also mental activities such as the imagination:

The imagination has been poorly analyzed to date because forms have been privileged in terms of activity and have been thought to take the initiative in psychic and physical life. In reality, there is a very strong kinship between life and thought. All the living matter cooperates in the life of a living organism. It is not only the most obvious or best-defined structures of the body that take active roles in life. Blood, lymph and connective tissue play a part in life. An individual is not only composed of a collection of organs interconnected to form a system. It is also composed of that which is neither organ nor structure of living matter inasmuch as it constitutes an associated milieu for the organs. Living matter is the ground for the organs. It is what links them together to make them an organism.<sup>29</sup>

Chapter 1 will elaborate briefly on Simondon’s concept of individuation and ontogenesis, and by using neocybernetic theory and theories of affect influenced by Simondon, the ecological aspects of individuation will be further highlighted. Thus, it will be argued that the notions of ontogenesis, as well as that of assemblage and

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p 21

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Grosz describes Simondon’s concept of individuation as environmental ontogenesis: “The individual is always more than itself, for it is an individual with the ongoing potential to undergo further changes after it is constituted as such. These pre-individual forces also constitute the milieu within which the individual is located, which provide the ongoing virtualities with which the individual must engage. The individual is merely one phase in the process of individuation, which is surrounded both before and after its emergence by pre-individual forces, potentialities. Being is at once pre-individual, individuating and individuated; it becomes something, something emerges or erupts, but it leaves in its context or milieu a residue or excess that is the condition for future becomings.” Elizabeth Grosz, “Identity and Individuation: Some Feminist Reflections”, in Arne de Boever, Alex Murray Jon Roffe and Ashley Woodward (eds.), *Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p 38

<sup>29</sup> Gilbert Simondon, “Technical Individuation”, trans Karen Ocana, Brian Massumi, in Joke Bouwer and Arjen Mulder (ed.), *Interact or Die* (Rotterdam: V2 Publishing, 2007), p 209

the rhizome, presuppose an ecological understanding of concepts. It is from this perspective that media, genres and texts function as ecosystems.

### Distributed agency: sympoiesis

The individual narratives generated by *Los Caprichos* – by connecting plates – are thus ultimately grounded in the environment of the medium as an ecosystem. This affects how *Los Caprichos* structures narrative sequence and trajectories, and not merely as an act of interpretation. The ambiguous perception of the fantastic is here materially situated in the perception of an actual – and not merely implied – reader. Participation is corporeal, affective and sensuous. And furthermore, participation coincides with the ecological ontogenesis of individuation.

The function of vision elaborated in Plate 43 is a point in case. Andrew Schulz notes that the dual function of dream and sleep is not isolated to Plate 43 but runs as the dominant theme of the series.<sup>30</sup> *Los Caprichos* could in a sense be read as a montage of dream images, emanating from Plate 43 and culminating in the concluding scenes of waking (Figure 5). However, this reading is not merely ques-

tioned by the ambiguous depiction of dream and sleep; it is further problematized, argues Schulz, by the participatory function of the viewer. The continual dislocation of the position of the viewer indicates the possibility, says Schulz, that the dream has been not that of the sleeping artist but of the viewer, who is now awakening: “If that is the case, the bizarre creatures and scenes that we witness in these etchings are not the products of the artist’s irrational mind”, he notes, and concludes: “Rather, and more importantly, they become visions of our own making.”<sup>31</sup>



Figure 5. Plate 78, “Despacha, que dispiértan.” (“Be quick, they are waking up”)

<sup>30</sup> The preliminary studies for *Los Caprichos* were a series of sketches titled “sueño”.

<sup>31</sup> Schulz, 2005, p 189

Although stressing the importance of a participatory viewer/reader to the aesthetics of the fantastic, Schulz here, like Todorov before him, insists that the ambiguity of *Los Caprichos* is ultimately a question of interpretation, where the viewer participates in the construction of meaning rather than visions.<sup>32</sup> Instead of merely focusing the discussion of the fantastic on meaning and interpretation, the ambiguous perception generated by *Los Caprichos* indicates precisely the need for a non-hermeneutical understanding of participation. In order to reach such an understanding, a different notion of perception is needed, one that situates perception in the environment in which it emerges. Instead of treating perception as structured in a hierarchy of senses, or for that matter as an experience contained within individual bodies perceiving other bodies, perception needs to be understood as a distributed cognition, situated in an ecology of mingled bodies. While such an understanding of subjectivity and perception can be traced throughout the whole of Western cultural history, it has nevertheless been more forcibly emphasized over the last few decades by a diversity of studies within the loosely defined fields of posthumanism, ecocriticism and new materialism.

Political philosopher Jane Bennett has argued for an understanding of cognition and perception based on the notion of the distributed agency of assemblages. Although Bennett is primarily speaking about political agency and ethical responsibility, and not aesthetic experience, her theory is relevant to the present discussion, as she is discussing how creativity and perception come forth as an event. Bennett suggests how human agency always emerges as a distribution of human and nonhuman agencies:

On close-enough inspection, the productive power that has engendered an effect will turn out to be a confederacy, and the human actants within it will themselves turn out to be confederations of tools, microbes, minerals, sounds and other 'foreign' materialities. Human intentionality can emerge as agentic only by way of such a distribution.<sup>33</sup>

Bennett argues that human agency always already involves nonhuman agents, something the notion of a self-contained and autonomous subjectivity – the notion of subjectivity that has dominated Western modernity – cannot conceive of. Furthermore, this does not merely involve organic material but also those materialities that are traditionally considered inanimate. Matter, in Bennett's analysis, participates in

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<sup>32</sup> "I would contend that it is the semantic indeterminacy of *Los Caprichos* that accounts for the continuous fascination of two centuries of viewers, as well as the shifting and often contradictory interpretations to which the prints have been subjected." Ibid., p 192

<sup>33</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p 36



the formation of agency; it is animate, vibrant matter. The distinction between subject and object is thus put aside. Instead, both subject and object are to be understood as assemblages, as swirls of materialities, that at times – such as in moments of agency or aesthetic perception – gain a distinct distribution, and as such constitute a distributed cognition.

The material environment of *Los Caprichos* – an environment that includes the material body of the reader – indicates a number of potential narratives, where each new plate adds to the number of units involved and to the potential distribution of units comprising a narrative. *Los Caprichos* here adheres to a narrative logic that materially stresses seriality and openness rather than narrative unity and closure. Reading *Los Caprichos* becomes a question of partaking in a distributed perception, where each unit has an agency – however infinitesimal – and influences the whole. As parts of a distributed cognition, all units are vibrant matter, actants, things with agency, breaching the subject-object divide that structures modernist and humanist notions of autonomy and subjectivity. This is how the ambiguous perception of the fantastic emerges. But it is important to note that while the emergence of a distributed perception coincides with a specific meaning structure, a distinct worldview or, in Bennett's words "a confederacy", this structure is in no sense to be understood as closed off or strictly self-regulating. As the perception is situated in an environment, it is always under the influence of temporal and spatial shifts; not only do new materialities surge into the confederation, the distribution among materialities also varies, over time. It is in this sense that the distribution of agencies in an assemblage functions as an ecology. Donna Haraway, whose theories on situated knowledge and companion species and whose conceptualization of cyborg feminism and naturecultures largely coincide with Bennett's political and ethical notion of distributed agency, has proposed the concept of *sympoiesis* to describe the ethos of an ecological, distributed subjectivity.<sup>34</sup> *Sympoiesis* elaborates on the biological and neocybernetic concept of autopoiesis but highlights how the emergence of the self-regulating and self-generating feedback loops of autopoiesis is a question of a distributed subjectivity, of becoming with, situated in an environment.

The ambiguous perceptions that Todorov posits as the heart of the fantastic hinges on the presence of a participatory reader. As an affective and sensuous state – the reader, says Todorov, experiences doubt, uncertainty and sometimes fear when confronted with the fantastic – participation in a fantastic perception questions a modernist and humanist notion of autonomy, and the aesthetic categories based upon

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<sup>34</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p 58ff



that notion.<sup>35</sup> Fantastic perception comes forth when perception is perceived as distributed, emerging in relation to the environment, characterized by sympoietic feedback.<sup>36</sup>

## Media-ecological definition of the fantastic

In order to assess the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic, a notion of literature and culture that theorizes aesthetic experience as situated in a material environment must be formulated. In short, theorizing the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic must first acknowledge that the concepts relevant to such a theory – concepts such as genre and media but also text, narrator and reader – function as ecosystems. This means studying the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic as an ecology of assemblages, as an ecology of ontogenetic media.<sup>37</sup>

Theorizing media ecologies, Mathew Fuller argues that an understanding of the ecological function of media is salient in new materialist and posthumanist media theories, in which scholars such as Hayles and Friedrich Kittler stress media as integrated in the construction of culture and society, as well as corporeal perceptions; media as having an ontological and not merely an epistemological function.<sup>38</sup> Basing his notion of media and media ecologies on Deleuze and Guattari's theories of the assemblage and the concept of the "machinic phylum", Fuller argues that it is precisely as a non-hermeneutic theory of media that a media-ecological approach is needed.<sup>39</sup> Media ecologies treat the material qualities of objects, and a medium, as "things-in-arrangement, rather than of their essence"<sup>40</sup>. Fuller refers to James Gibson's theory of affordances, according to which perception is grounded in the environment, and where a medium affords a specific perception in accordance with a specific set of actualized circumstances. Media, says Gibson, are no more than a set of actualized affordances. Fuller points to the inherent feedback of Gibson's theory,

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<sup>35</sup> While positing uncertainty and doubt as criteria for the fantastic, Todorov is reluctant to use fear as a criterion, since it depends on the existence of an actual reader and not merely an implied one. If the sentiment of fear is a formal criterion, "a work's genre depends on the sang-froid of its reader", says Todorov and concludes: "Fear is often linked to the fantastic, but it is not a necessary condition of the genre." Todorov, 1975, p 35

<sup>36</sup> In this sense, the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic, highlighting an affective environmental complexity as part of the aesthetic experience, is related to the environmental aesthetics described by Timothy Morton as *ecomimesis*. Timothy Morton, *Ecology without nature: rethinking environmental aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), p 31ff

<sup>37</sup> Jussi Parikka, investigating media as environments, as "milieu", notes: "Any assemblage works on various spatial and temporal scales and hence as an 'ecology' of kinds.", Jussi Parikka, *Insect Media: an archaeology of animals and technology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p xxvii

<sup>38</sup> Matthew Fuller, *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), p 4-5

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p 22

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p 45

where a distributed notion of subjectivity is implied in the definition. “An affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective and helps us to understand its inadequacy”, Gibson writes, and continues: “It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior, it is both physical and psychological, yet neither. An affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer.”<sup>41</sup>

Following a media-ecological understanding of how media interact in establishing an environmental infrastructure, the aesthetic of the fantastic will be described as the ecological sympoiesis of an ontogenetic environment. It is precisely as a world building medium that the fantastic functions: the fantastic presents a world never seen, impossible, unreal, supernatural. Furthermore, it will be argued that this comes about just as Todorov describes it, by generating an ambiguous perception. But perception here is not a matter of interpretation, of hermeneutics, it does not separate form from matter. The ambiguous perception of the fantastic lies not in the fact that cognition comes out as an assemblage of distributed agencies but in the ecological function of that distribution. The fantastic stresses the uncanny nature of media as ecosystems; pointing to the ontological creativity of media, at the same time it enforces the ontological instability of created worlds, always opening up to new assemblages, new ecological couplings. It is here that the aesthetics of the fantastic differs from realistic representation, or fiction in general, in that it explicitly highlights and, as has already been mentioned, operationalizes the ontogenesis of media, genres and texts.

### **Time of the Carnival: play and the fantastic**

The 6<sup>th</sup> of February 1799, the day a notice in the *Diario de Madrid* advertised the sale of “A collection of Prints of Capricious Subjects, Invented and Etched by Don Francisco Goya”, was a Wednesday. More precisely, it was Ash Wednesday, the day in the Catholic calendar that marks the end of Carnival and the start of Lent. To the media history of the fantastic, this fact seems to be no coincidence. And while it is tempting to invest an undue amount of significance to the symbolic force of threshold events such as turns of a century, this date nevertheless indicates how *Los Caprichos* embodies a historical transition: where in Western modernity the carnivalesque practices – essentially functioning as participatory fantasies – of popular festivals are to a large extent subsumed by popular media, and what in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was defined as popular culture.

This transition of the Carnival into new media practices certainly does not take place at the turn of the century. Nor does modernity. But the events of the French

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<sup>41</sup> James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1986), p 129

Revolution and the decade following up to 1799 do have a significant impact on the cultural function of the Carnival. In a sense, the abolishment of the Carnival in many European Catholic countries following the French Revolution can be seen as a culmination of a process that had been going on for centuries (and particularly in areas under Protestant dominion), where the rites of passages enacted during the festival had increasingly been transformed into the iconography of spectacle. When the Carnival was resumed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, its character had changed from a participatory cultural event into a theatrical staging of an event.<sup>42</sup> Where the carnivalesque world-upside-down in pre-modern European societies had functioned as a secondary world, a world governed by otherworldly laws and situated – spatially and temporally – outside the borders of ordinary, mundane society, its function in the modern world becomes more and more confined to one of symbolic upheaval. The Carnival is no longer enacted, but interpreted. Or rather, the enactment of the Carnival becomes more and more situated in the material practices of popular media.

The critical reception of *Los Caprichos* mirrors this transformation of the Carnival in the culture of Western modernity. By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, collections of prints depicting traditional, pre-modern rites and customs – particularly those of the Carnival – were an increasingly popular medium throughout Europe. The world-upside-down had been a common motive in printed broadsheets from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, when the iconography was codified. These sheets displayed the rites and procedures of the Carnival without any clear structure or narrative organization, apart from converging opposite categories towards the middle of the print, around the circular figure of an upside-down globe. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the images of Carnival were increasingly organized in small, numbered panels, often accompanied by captions, but without any clear indication as to the order in which these discrete units should be read.<sup>43</sup> In this sense, the narrative openness of *Los Caprichos* and the participatory function of the reader are to some degree part of an already established cultural practice. The tension between a linear, codex structured reading and the multidirectional reading of broadsheets is, however, made both less visible and more tangible by binding the sequence of prints in a book. Where the broadsheets function as a map for the imagination, a site upon which to enact the play of Carnival, this function of play is transferred into the medium of the book, denaturalizing the codex as a structuring, cultural form.

The theories of Mikhail Bakhtin are useful in situating the media-ecological function of the fantastic in the culture of modernity. Pre-modern, carnivalesque culture,

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<sup>42</sup> Stoichita and Coderch, 1999, Chapter 2

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 19-22

says Bakhtin, is characterized by embodied cultural practices, focusing on the material presence of experience. This comes out as an aesthetics of grotesque realism. Grotesque realism, in Bakhtin's sense, focuses on the conflation and overturning of conceptual categories and hierarchies: the grotesque image is boundless, transgressive and hybridizing, presenting a world never before seen, in fact, beyond the confines of this world (or beyond established cultural genres). It is a purely positive force, says Bakhtin, generative, associated with laughter and joy: "In grotesque realism, therefore, the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egoistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world; it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earth and the body."<sup>44</sup> The grotesque image is continuously unstable, negating final form. As such, it differs from the function of the grotesque in modernity, and particularly how the grotesque is adapted within the aesthetics of Romanticism, where it obtains a negative and satirical function. The Gothic novel and the Romantic fantastic tale incorporate the grotesque as a critique of Enlightenment rationalism and its utilitarian world order, says Bakhtin, but it does so at great cost. By turning Carnival into a literary motif, the modern grotesque of Romanticism becomes a "grotesque of the chamber", a carnival experienced by an individual in isolation.<sup>45</sup> Where the pre-modern grotesque embodies a connection between the world and human experience, grounding human experience as embodied in the world, the romantic, modern grotesque estranges the world from that of human experience.<sup>46</sup> A collective culture of play becomes a culture of individual consumerism. Transformed into a spectacle to be experienced from a distance, under the aegis of Kantian disinterestedness, the modern, romantic grotesque ceases to be a positive and creative force. The dialectics of the Carnival, upturning the distinction between mind and body, form and matter, individual and collective, becomes solidified into static dualism. It is merely satire, a unit of meaning content to be interpreted, rather than experienced.

While Bakhtin's theory of the Carnival and the function of the grotesque clearly posits an idealized notion of pre-modern society as a genuine, non-reified folk culture, it does point to an innate weakness in the analytical categories of modernism when it comes to dealing with cultural forms that do not fit within the confines of a subject-object duality. Modernity turns play into spectacle, participation into

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<sup>44</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p 19

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p 37

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p 39

observation, body into mind. Bakhtin's solution to the problem of art in the age of modernity is to point to what he perceives as the potential dialogicity of language, where language becomes collective and opens up for inter-subjective creativity. This notion brings Bakhtin's theories close to an ecological understanding of subjectivity and material agency. However, there is still a tendency in Bakhtin, and in the studies of the fantastic that follow on Bakhtin, to posit language – albeit dialogic language – as the *only* means by which humans and cultural objects can connect and communicate. This is not the case when dealing with works of the fantastic, in which material presence and embodied practices do communicate, albeit by way of an ambiguous perception.

Nevertheless, it is clear that *Los Caprichos* engages in a play with language, and with the hermeneutic ambiguity of language. There is also unquestionably a dialogicity at work, in between the different modes of enunciation actualized: *Los Caprichos* can be described as a polyphonic work of art. “The author's voice”, writes Janis A Tomlison, “– in *Los Caprichos* and in Goya's oeuvre as a whole – is subsumed by a multitude of other voices: the traditions of art addressed, the personalities of the subjects portrayed, the portrayed desires of the patrons or intended public. The resultant polyphony remains to be explored.”<sup>47</sup> In addition to the verbal language of the captions, several explanatory editions of commentaries on *Los Caprichos*, believed to have been authored by persons close to Goya, if not by Goya himself, soon became an integrated part of the work, together with the manifesto-like proclamation published in the *Diario de Madrid*. And the iconography of the images themselves is derived from several subsets of historically and culturally delineated systems of meaning-production. The critical reception of *Los Caprichos* has been dominated by attempts, from different ideological approaches, to provide encompassing and stable interpretations of this heterogeneous set of intersecting media systems. However, it is equally clear that in the production of the ambiguous perception of the fantastic, *Los Caprichos* does not merely bring together preexisting and self-contained entities into new configurations. Reading *Los Caprichos* entails participating in a game of configuration that works reciprocally and anarchically, delineating subjectivity as already in configuration. The medium of *Los Caprichos* is a game in which participation reconfigures the player; it is not a spectacle to observe safely from a distance.

## The ecological fantastic

Latour makes a strong case against the divisions of the modern constitution, but then again, it could also be argued that such a division has nevertheless been opera-

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<sup>47</sup> Janis A Tomlison, *Goya in the Twilight of Enlightenment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p 7

tive, though perhaps as a form of ideology or false consciousness or legitimizing narrative, within large parts of Western modernity. Clearly, there can be delineated a period in Western cultural history, when the hegemonic concepts of culture and society were modern, in the sense indicated by Latour. Roughly beginning with the formulation of the Cartesian subject, and perhaps to some extent being solidified by Kantian rationality, and culminating, as Gumbrecht argues, in the hermeneutical form of communication and subjectivity, the modern division between nature and culture, subject and object, human and nonhuman, has held sway. This is the notion of the modern world that Gumbrecht refers to as the “hermeneutic field”.<sup>48</sup> And to the extent that media, and discourse systems such as media, are ontogenetic, the modern world does exist, generated by the modern constitution itself, in a feedback loop of ecological sympoiesis. And within the hermeneutic field of the modern world the fantastic has the function of an epistemological hesitation, as Todorov describes it. Within the hermeneutic field, subjects and objects are autonomous and divided, as is nature and culture. However, if the concepts of the modern world are ecological concepts, as is argued throughout this dissertation, then the modern world is also the site for a non-modern world, a world in which becoming is a process of embodied emergence, and where the environmental emergence of quasi-objects supplements the division of objects and subjects. And in this world, both modern and non-modern, the material ambiguities of ontogenetic objects haunt the hermeneutic ambiguities of transcendental forms, not in the form of a dialectics of presence and absence, but, as will be further discussed in Chapter 1, by the paradoxically open closure of sympoietic feedback. Tzvetan Todorov’s definition of the fantastic here emerges as a way to prefigure the function of ambiguity – material as well as hermeneutic, ontological as well as epistemological – in the creation of worlds.

Participating in the emergent subjectivity of *Los Caprichos* is not merely a matter of acknowledging that the discrete signifying units comprising this particular book of prints – whether images, captions, prints or the bodily movements enacted in the act of reading – are simultaneously works of purification and works of hybridization. It also entails moving beyond that constitution, admitting, as Jane Bennett proposes, following Latour, crossings that do not merely imply the negation of a static entity.<sup>49</sup> In order to do so, it is necessary to take the environment of mediation into consideration, or rather understand mediation as the emergence of an environment, as a distinct and momentary distribution of agencies.

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<sup>48</sup> Gumbrecht, 2004, p 28

<sup>49</sup> Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: attachments, crossings, and ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p 31

*Los Caprichos* lingers on the brink of the modern world. Clearly it is reductive to treat it as a single narrative, whether proffering a critique of the Enlightenment or a narrative of an Enlightenment Goya matters not. As has been pointed out repeatedly by recent criticism, the case is more complicated. However, addressing the ambiguous perceptions generated by *Los Caprichos*, the same critics, while engaging and exploring the polyphony and the carnivalesque in Goya's work, still remain on the side of hermeneutics, treating the work as a complex and ambiguous, but nevertheless coherent whole. Thus the critical discussion of *Los Caprichos* is still operating with the conceptual categories of the modern constitution, focusing on image and text in contest, as a hybrid work of art, but never questioning the basic integrity and identity of the categories involved. In such an approach, consistently generating a coherent meaning structure, *Los Caprichos* functions as the staging of the spectacle of carnival, rather than as a material enactment of the play of carnival. Such an approach behaves like the two combatants in Goya's painting "Duelo a garrotazos" ("Fight with Cudgels", Figure 6), a painting that Michel Serres discusses in the introduction to his short essay *The Natural Contract* (1995) as a staging of the environmental blindness of the modern constitution. Caught up in the fight, two duelists in a field seem oblivious of the surrounding environment swallowing them both, a blindness that is transferred to the detached spectator of modernist art, a blindness to the world that Serres finds characteristic of Western modernity:

Take away the world around the battles, keep only conflicts or debates, thick with humanity and purified of things, and you obtain stage theater, most of our narratives and philosophies, history and all of social science: the interesting spectacle they call cultural. Does anyone ever say *where* the master and slave fight it out?  
Our culture abhors the world.<sup>50</sup>

It is perhaps significant that "Duelo a garrotazos" is part of the series of murals Goya executed in his country estate *Quinta del sordo* ("Villa of the Deaf") late in his life, known as the *Pinturas negras* ("Black paintings"). These paintings, often with motifs of the fantastical and grotesque, were transferred in the 1870s to canvases and are now in the collections of *El Prado*, tangibly isolated from their cultural and material environment.

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<sup>50</sup> Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, trans. Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p 3





Figure 6. Francisco de Goya, “Duelo a garrotazos” (“Fight with Cudgels”), 1820-1823, El Prado

## The argument

Taking the environment of mediation into consideration is what the present investigation of the fantastic intends to do. However, when theorizing the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic, it is important to first acknowledge – precisely because extant theories of the fantastic have used conceptual frameworks congruent with the modern constitution – that such a theory is still largely unwritten. In many ways this will be a first attempt. Thus a media-ecological theory of the fantastic involves re-situating a number of theoretical concepts into a novel environment. The first chapter will therefore look into the ways in which the different discourses of the literary fantastic presented since Todorov’s definition can inform the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic. At the same time the theoretical discourses of the fantastic will provide tools to further delineate the ontogenetic function of media as an environmental event.

Chapter 1 is divided into three sections, approaching media, genres and texts as ecosystems. Accordingly, these three sections argue an ecological reformulation of the concepts relevant to the study of media, genres and texts. Throughout the chapter, the comic book *The Unwritten*, by Mike Carey and Peter Gross, will serve as a reference point and specific milieu for the discussion, delineating some of the most relevant concepts and indicating a rationale for the three main chapters of the dissertation.

What follows after the brief theoretical treatise of Chapter 1 are three case studies of media ecologies in which the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic is operative. These three chapters concern related (if by nothing else, by the present argument) but quite distinct cultural objects. Chapter 2 takes an extended look at the vast – and still vastly expanding – set of objects connected to the (predominantly) literary work



of the writer and scholar J. R. R. Tolkien. By delineating a media ecology of Middle-earth (the secondary, fantasy world in which Tolkien's most famous works are set), the aesthetics of the fantastic is contrasted with the aesthetics of modernism, offering an indication of how a non-modernist – neither premodern nor postmodern – concept of fantastic literature can be formulated. Widely considered as central in the emergence of the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century, popular genre of fantasy, the media-ecological investigation of Tolkien's work will also deepen the understanding of that particular genre, as well as offering an ecological approach to the theory of genre.

Having investigated Tolkien and the popular genre of fantasy, Chapter 3 turns to another prominent contemporary media system for stories of the supernatural: the American comic book superhero. By tracing the historical configurations and re-configurations of the superhero character Miracleman, a media ecology of considerable spatial and temporal extension is sketched, indicating how the aesthetics of the comic book superhero can be defined as one of ecological sympoiesis. The medium of the comic book here offers a material platform for a discussion on participation and distributed agency, arguing the need for a theory of comic book aesthetics that is radically medium-specific, utilizing theoretical insights from extant, predominately semiotic and narratological theories, but without reproducing the modern liberal humanist aesthetics that such theories are based on. The American comic book superhero understood as a fantastic medium, generating an ambiguous perception by an event of ecological sympoiesis, will thus indicate how a number of critical concepts and categories – categories such as narrator, character, and focalization and concepts such as producer and consumer – integral to the modernist notion of literature and art are inadequate for describing aesthetic participation.

Chapter 4 discusses the ecological function of the fantastic in the work of William Blake. Using Rockefeller Plaza in New York City as a media-archeological site, the sympoietic aesthetics of William Blake, innate in the “infernal method” of his illuminated printing, but only recently comprehensively articulated through critical studies of the digitalization of his illuminated books, will further stress the historical relation between the fantastic and the ontogenesis of media. Following studies on the digitization of William Blake, particularly the digitization executed by The William Blake Archive, the chapter argues for a media-ecological understanding of Blake's aesthetics, which is used as a starting point to investigate a series of adaptations where Blake's work participates: the artistic decorations at Rockefeller Center in New York City; Blake's illustrations to Dante's *Divine Comedy*; Grant Morrison's use of Blake in the superhero comic *The Invisibles*; the function of Blake in Philip Pullman's fantasy trilogy *His Dark Materials*; and lastly, the adaptation, executed in LEGO, on display in the LEGO Concept store at Rockefeller Plaza, of Lee Lawrie's adaptation of William Blake's frontispiece to the illuminated book *Europe, a Prophecy*.

The material selection for the three main chapters of this dissertation is to some extent indicated by the reformulation of theoretical concepts in Chapter 1. Thus it could be argued that the three chapters correspond to the tripartite division of Chapter 1. Chapter 2 focuses on Tolkien and the emergence of the popular genre of fantasy, arguing that that an ecological function of genre is operative in fantasy and in the work of Tolkien. Chapter 3 then focuses on the ecological function of the medium of American superhero comics, while the main focus in Chapter 4 is on how participatory texts function as ecosystems. To a certain degree, this is a valid characterization. However, as the theoretical discussion in Chapter 1 will indicate, there are no definite distinctions to be made between the functions of media, genre and text. In fact, as ecosystems they traverse levels of distinction. While each chapter to some extent focuses mainly on one aspect of the tripartite division made in Chapter 1, all three chapters engage, in some degree or another, with all three aspects.

The three main case studies of this dissertation have been chosen precisely as case studies. Comprising historically influential representations of the fantastic – fantasy, superhero comics and visionary poetry have undoubtedly played an important part in the cultural history of the fantastic – it is also argued that they here function as exemplary specimens of an ecological reformulation of the concepts of media, genre and textuality. While the three studies presented here form a coherent and mutually informative argument, this does not mean that the proposed theoretical framework is limited to these three instances. It is rather the intention that this dissertation will also offer a means to theorize and investigate other ecologies of the fantastic than the ones studied here. Or, to be more precise, and in accordance with the main argument, it could be claimed that other ecosystems could be, and in fact already are, structurally coupled to the ones investigated here. As such, a media-ecological study of H. P. Lovecraft in relation to the horror genre would quite possibly parallel the present study of Tolkien and the fantasy genre. As would, for that matter, tracing the participatory aesthetics of weird fantasy by writers such as China Miéville, Steph Swainston, Leena Krohn and Karin Tidbeck. And investigating adaptations of Lewis Carroll's two books about Alice, *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), in relation to the configurative textuality and the media-specific materialities of Carroll's books, would undoubtedly result in a media ecology of vast ramifications. Likewise, studying the media system of American and European comics from the position of the hybrid comics produced by the French anthology magazine *Métal Hurlant* (1975-1988) connects the participatory media of the comic book to the world building of the fantastic, much like the investigation of *Miracleman* in Chapter 3. And investigating horror comics from the position of Mike Mignola's *Hellboy* (1993) would highlight a participatory aesthetics on the level of genre, as well as text and media, while a media-ecological study of the different periodicals – such as *Amaz-*

*ing Stories* (1926), *The Strand Magazine* (1891), *New Worlds* (1946) and *Weird Tales* (1923) – that historically have had a strong impact on the aesthetics of the fantastic, would prove elucidating not least in contextualizing the collective or semi-collective creativity operative in these publications.

One media ecology whose absence in this dissertation might appear as surprising, even perhaps to the detriment of the argument, is that of the modern, literary fantastic that is the locus of Todorov's analysis. As was mentioned earlier, Todorov's definition of the fantastic is based on literature produced within what Gumbrecht defines as the hermeneutic field. It should come as no surprise then, that it focuses hermeneutic ambiguity, and that this approach serves the material well. Conversely, it is perfectly understandable that Todorov's definition does not suit literature produced outside the hermeneutic field. However, adapting Todorov's definition to an ecological framework would not only make it applicable to a non-hermeneutic fantastic but also show how the hermeneutic ambiguities of the literary fantastic quite often are related to a material ambiguity. It is, in fact, this material ambiguity that has been highlighted in narratological and postmodernist adaptations of Todorov's definition. Furthermore, it has often been pointed out, by Kittler as well as Todorov, that the relation between mediating objects and the creation of other worlds is continuously emphasized in the fantastic of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century literature. This is indicative, argues Kittler, of how imagination within the discourse network of the 1800s is located in "the space between lamp and book" where "the new fantastic is identical with a technology."<sup>51</sup> Thus, while Todorov's definition was formulated to comport to the literary fantastic of the hermeneutic field, this does not mean that an adaptation of the definition to a media-ecological framework should in any way be seen as a critique of its original usefulness. Rather, a reformulation of the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic shows how its ambiguities are ontological as well as epistemological, arguing that Todorov's hermeneutic definition of the fantastic could be adapted to also describe the material ambiguities of a literary fantastic operative within the hermeneutic field of modern, and postmodern literature.

While the mappings of media ecologies in each of the main chapters of this dissertation function as distinct case studies, it will also be argued, at the end, that they are, as ecosystems, structurally coupled. Media ecologies of the fantastic, they are ecologies of the imagination, enabling, like the transmogrifications described by Dante during his descent into Hell, the embodied emergence of worlds "never before seen"<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, transl. Michael Metteer, with Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p 91

<sup>52</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Robert M. Durling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p 384, p 385

## Chapter 1:

# *The Unwritten, Writing a Media Ecology of the Fantastic*

There are only two books in being which at all pretend to put the living Sperm Whale before you, and at the same time, in the remotest degree succeed in the attempt. Those books are Beale's and Bennett's; both in their time surgeons to English South-Sea whale-ships, and both exact and reliable men. The original matter touching the Sperm Whale to be found in their volumes is necessarily small; but so far as it goes, it is of excellent quality, though mostly confined to scientific description. As yet, however, the Sperm Whale, scientific or poetic, lives not complete in any literature. Far above all other hunted whales, his is an unwritten life.<sup>53</sup>

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick; Or, The Whale* (1851)

A theory of the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic, much like the history of the sperm whale, referred to in the excerpt from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* above, remains unwritten. Thus, theorizing the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic, as indicated in the Introduction, will require a reformulation of a number of critical categories with which literature has been defined and discussed within Western modernity. This reformulation follows roughly Bruno Latour's analysis of the modern constitution. First of all, to properly understand the aesthetics of the contemporary fantastic, it is necessary to abandon the modernist and hermeneutical notion of the autonomous work of art. Aesthetic autonomy itself needs to be reformulated. At the base of this reformulation lies an ecological conceptualization of subjectivity, whereby experience and cognition emerge as a momentary distribution of agencies, in an environmental feedback loop. It will be argued that media, as well as genres and texts, function as ecosystems in which environments and subjectivities come into being. Jussi Parikka, in the introduction to his book *Insect Media, an archeology of animals and technology* (2010), sums up such an approach neatly:

Media, then, in this book, are not only a technology, a political agenda, or an exclusively human theme. Media are a contraction of forces of the world into specific resonating

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<sup>53</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: Calla Editions, 2015), p 135. The Calla Editions *Moby Dick* is a reprint of *Moby Dick, or, The Whale*, published by Harper and Brothers, New York, 1851

milieus: internal milieus with their resonance, external milieus affording their rhythms as part of that resonance. An animal has to find a common tune with its environment, and a technology has to work through rhythmic relations with other force fields such as politics and economics. In this context, sensations, percepts, and affects become the primary vectors through which entities are co-created at the same time as their environment.<sup>54</sup>

If the cultural history of the fantastic is defined by participatory practices – as is, for example, the cultural practice of the medieval Carnival discussed in the introduction – a media ecology of the fantastic entails understanding material participation – as in the case with *Los Caprichos* – as the cybernetic co-creation of subjectivity and environment. In the following chapter, it will be argued that the ambiguities of the fantastic, hermeneutic as well as material, are tied to the emergent organization of ecosystems. Only an ecosystem can accommodate the exteriority of the sperm whale, whose skin emerges, says Melville, as the ultimate alien medium, marked by the recordings of its environment:

In life, the visible surface of the Sperm Whale is not the least among the marvels he presents. Almost invariably it is all over obliquely crossed and re-crossed with numberless straight marks in thick array, something like those in the finest Italian line engravings. But these marks do not seem to be impressed upon the isinglass substance above mentioned, but seem to be seen through it, as if they were engraved upon the body itself. In some instances, to the quick, observant eye, those linear marks, as in a veritable engraving, but afford the ground for far other delineations. These are hieroglyphical; that is, if you call those mysterious cyphers on the walls of pyramids hieroglyphics, then that is the proper word to use in the present connexion. By my retentive memory of the hieroglyphics upon one Sperm Whale in particular, I was much struck with a plate representing the old Indian characters chiselled on the famous hieroglyphic palisades on the banks of the Upper Mississippi. Like those mystic rocks, too, the mystic-marked whale remains undecipherable.<sup>55</sup>

The following chapter is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the concept of media as an ecosystem. The second section offers an ecological framework for the concept of genre, while the third section conceptualizes text as a participatory ecosystem. The comic book series *The Unwritten*, by Mike Carey and Peter Gross, published by the DC imprint Vertigo Comics 2009-2015, will serve in

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<sup>54</sup> Parikka, 2010, p xiv

<sup>55</sup> Melville 2015, p 303

this chapter as a material context in which to theorize the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic, indicating a number of concepts and categories pertinent to the endeavor.

## 1. The Whale: Media as Ecosystem

Participation, both as a theme for the narrative and as an aesthetic practice, serves a crucial function in the plot of *The Unwritten*. Unfolding as a classic Manichean fantasy, peppered with metafictional comments on the history of the fantastic and its function with Western literature, *The Unwritten* narrates a struggle for narrative – and in extension, ontogenetic – power. On the one side, there is an ancient and mystical conspiracy, a *Cabal*, with the goal of controlling and regulating narrative and controlling culture and the human mind. On the other side, there is Tom Taylor, a real-life person (within the fiction, that is), who has been transformed, at least in part, into the fictional (once again, within the fictional universe of *The Unwritten*) character of Tommy Taylor, a boy-wizard genius, setting free the creative, and magic, forces of narrative. But in order to do so, it becomes clear as the story progresses, he needs the support of the collective; or rather, creative narrative needs participatory readers, readers engaging in, and at the same time being engaged by, the construction of stories. Thus, *The Unwritten* argues that an ecological conceptualization of subjectivity means acknowledging autonomy as a distribution of agency; there is no position outside from which to organize the world. In this sense, and in the sense of the modern world, freedom does not exist. Only acknowledging this basic fact of living can the cabals of the world be undone.

In the story arc “Leviathan”, consisting of issues 19-23, collected in the trade paperback *The Unwritten 4: Leviathan*, Tommy Taylor hunts a whale.<sup>56</sup> It is not a particular whale; or rather it is every conceivable whale, any large monster of the deep that has ever, at one time or another in the history of creation, been the subject of a story. The hunt for the whale takes Tommy Taylor on a journey through a number of well-known story worlds. After spending some time on the Pequod as Mr Bulkington, a minor character in *Moby Dick*, only mentioned in passing as a cautionary tale about the perils at sea, albeit by a metafictional reference to the materiality of the book, Tommy Taylor briefly encounters Sinbad the Sailor just at the moment he and his sailors step ashore on the island that is a whale, after which they are all swal-

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<sup>56</sup> Mike Carey & Peter Gross *The Unwritten 4: Leviathan* (New York: DC Comics, 2011). If nothing else is mentioned, the trade paperback editions of *The Unwritten* are used in this chapter, references to issues in the single issue print run will, however, be made, since the trade paperbacks do not have page numbers.

lowed whole by the huge beast.<sup>57</sup> Inside the belly of the whale Tommy meets up with another group of fictional characters whose storyworlds are somehow connected with whales: Jonah, Pinocchio, Baron Munchausen, and the Hibernian from Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories* (1902). Finally, after blowing up the whale in true Munchausenesque fashion, Tommy Taylor finds what he set out to look for: the Leviathan. Or rather he finds the heart of story, the heart of Hobbes' metaphor: the collective.

In a spread where the convulsions of the explosion are represented as a break-up of the structuring panels of the comic book, Tommy Taylor contemplates the nature of the whale and its relation to fiction (Figure 7). He himself is a fictional character. Or to be more precise, he is a fictional character who in part has become a fiction within the fiction. And furthermore, he is aware of his own fictionalization. The reasons for this transformation are tied to a very complex and vast conspiracy comprising all the history of mankind, and particularly the history of narrative, the eternal and epic struggle against the Cabal. But the more acute reason is that his dead father, Wilson Taylor, wrote an enormously popular series of fantasy books about a young boy-wizard genius by the name of Tommy Taylor who goes to wizard school and grows up confronting the powers of darkness.

Making his living doing promotional gigs and appearing at conventions for book signings, in his dead father's absence, barely getting on, in the first issue of *The Unwritten* the real Tom Taylor is transformed into his father's fictional creation. Now, in Issue #23 in a spread where the panels and gutter of the comic book are broken, undulating seemingly without purpose and no longer offering a clear structure for the narration, Tommy Taylor confronts the whale (Figure 7). At least, that is what he appears to be doing. The unconventional paneling of the spread undermines any definite ground for articulation. The art shows Tommy talking from various angles, without, however, ever actually showing his addressee, producing an erratic discourse, a simultaneity of voices distributed over the page, disturbing the space-time continuum established by the comic book format.

After some time of deliberation he comes to the conclusion that the whale, this Leviathan, is raw narrative force, narrative with the power to generate consensus re-

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<sup>57</sup> The short chapter in which Bulkington meets his demise at sea explicitly situates the narrative within the book, marking the physical characteristics of the text and pointing to its function as a memory device: "Some chapters back, one Bulkington was spoken of, a tall, newlanded mariner, encountered in New Bedford at the inn. When on that shivering winter's night, the Pequod thrust her vindictive bows into the cold malicious waves, who should I see standing at her helm but Bulkington! I looked with sympathetic awe and fearfulness upon the man, who in mid-winter just landed from a four years' dangerous voyage, could so unrestingly push off again for still another tempestuous term. The land seemed scorching to his feet. Wonderfulest things are ever the unmentionable; deep memories yield no epitaphs; this six-inch chapter is the stoneless grave of Bulkington." Melville 2015, p 111





Figure 7: Mike Carey & Peter Gross *The Unwritten* #23

ality: “I think that you’re that. Kind of... The collective unconscious, or something”, and continuing in another panel, “The fictional unconscious. The minds of all the millions of people who read my father’s books. Or any books, maybe.”

In the concluding panel of the spread, Tommy finally seems to find his interlocutor. Now, however, instead of turning to a point out of focus, but within the story world of the comic, it would appear that he addresses the reader directly. This meta-fictional breaking of the fourth wall, this moment of narrative metalepsis, has been previously signaled not only by the breaking of the frames but also by two panels with enhanced close-ups from the frontispiece of Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, remediating the original woodcut. The folding of voices and interpellations, matched by a corresponding folding of media, disturbs the levels of representation, bestowing on a fictional character the power of direct discourse outside of the fictional frame: “I can use a magic wand because you believe...for as long as you’re reading the book...that Tommy can use a magic wand. I exist in the suspension of your disbelief.”

Indicating here, by direct reference to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s famous and much discussed treatise on the faculties of creative imagination, published in *Biographia Literaria* in 1817, a continuation of the historical discourse on the nature of the fantastic, *The Unwritten*, and a media history of the fantastic, will nevertheless argue that the necessary suspension of disbelief at work here is in a sense much more radical than the willing suspension of disbelief prefigured by Coleridge as a mode for



imaginative poetry, and as a necessary ground for the poetic belief in the supernatural, in order “to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.”<sup>58</sup> Where Coleridge – and the Romantic tradition following him – conceptualizes poetic “Imagination” as an absolutely creative faculty, opposed to the derivative faculty of “Fancy”, and functioning by an idealistic dialectics, ultimately grounded in a transcendent subjectivity, it is precisely such oppositional thinking that the present argument seeks to overcome. Rather than willingly entering a game of make-believe, based on the dialectical oppositions of the modern constitution, it will be argued that the medium of the fantastic operates – as has been pointed out in the introduction – by itself becoming part of the perceptual apparatus, generating an ambiguous perception not by representation or interpretation but by participation in a distributed cognition. The Romantic tradition, and the discourse on the fantastic within that tradition – a discourse whose aesthetics often stems from and continues an analysis of the nature of the sublime – have had an enormous impact on the modern and postmodern discourse of the fantastic, and while there are threads within the romantic tradition that point in a different direction, particularly within the already mentioned discourses of the sublime, it would nevertheless seem that the transcendent idealism of Romanticism still haunts modernist and postmodernist ideas of the literary fantastic.<sup>59</sup>

What is relevant here is not that Tommy Taylor refers to a Romantic discourse on the faculties of imagination; it is the manner in which this statement emerges as part of the material environment of the comic book spread. This is not a question of form mirroring content. Such an analogy leads away from an ecological understanding of the medium. The subjectivity in which the suspension of disbelief comes about is not in a transcendental relation to the form and content of the medium but is cybernetically grounded in the environment of the medium. The broken panels and erratic vectors of the dialogue of the spread, together with the already mentioned remediation of the frontispiece of Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, and the metalepsis in effect as Tommy Taylor turns directly to the reader, focuses the reading of the comic book spread as situated in a medium that involves the body in an ambiguous, distributed perception. The spread functions in a simultaneity of participating agencies, where the erratic search for an interlocutor highlights how the modern concept of vision – and the narratological concept of focalization based upon that concept – as a separated

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<sup>58</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter XIV

<sup>59</sup> David Sandner traces the influence of the early discourses of the sublime on the tradition of the fantastic, pointing out the common conflation of the adjacent concepts of the sublime, the grotesque and the fantastic. David Sandner, *Critical Discourses of the Fantastic, 1712-1831* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), particularly in Chapters 1-3 discusses the sublime and its relation to the fantastic.

and autonomous sense is contested by the material environment of the medium.<sup>60</sup> Not only is vision clearly correlated to movement and touch when reading a comic book spread – a spread will fold if not held by something or someone, particularly if read in the trade paperback edition that has been the industry standard since the late 1980s; but vision also becomes a gradated sense, equally active in the periphery as in the focalization between object and subject. And as Todorov's analysis indicated, it is here, in the periphery where senses mingle, that the unwritten corpus of the fantastic will emerge.

## Participation and embodiment

Reading the comic book spread is here clearly an embodied experience, understanding embodiment as an emerging property, following Hayles' conceptualization: "In contrast to the body, embodiment is contextual, enmeshed within the specifics of place, time, physiology, and culture, which together compose enactment. Embodiment never coincides exactly with 'the body', however that normalized concept is understood. Whereas the body is an idealized form that gestures toward a Platonic reality, embodiment is the specific instantiation generated from the noise of difference."<sup>61</sup> Embodiment in this sense marks an event of cognition that the reader becomes part of, as a distribution of agencies. This is what it entails, according to Hayles, to become posthuman. It is not a question of one-sided appropriation or submission on the part of the reader. Nor is it a question of a dialectical process, where a qualitative, and quantifiable, experience arises as the outcome of an interrelation between work and reader. Rather, this process constitutes work and reader alike, and as such it needs to be framed within a cybernetic conceptualization of subjectivity and experience. Once such a conceptualization has been delineated, it becomes possible to hypostasize a media-ecological model for the aesthetics of the fantastic, a model that will provide a much-needed alternative to the hermeneutical model of reading.

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<sup>60</sup> Jonathan Crary discusses the emergence of a separation of the senses in 19<sup>th</sup>-century modernity and states: "Thus, in my delineation of a modernization and revaluation of vision, I indicate how the sense of touch had been an integral part of classical theories of vision in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The subsequent dissociation of touch from sight occurs within a pervasive 'separation of the senses' and industrial remapping of the body in the nineteenth century. The loss of touch as a conceptual component of vision meant the unloosening of the eye from the network of referentiality incarnated in tactility and its subjective relation to perceived space. The autonomization of sight, occurring in many different domains, was a historical condition for the rebuilding of an observer fitted for the tasks of 'spectacular' consumption. Not only did the empirical isolation of vision allow its quantification and homogenization but it also enabled new objects of vision (whether commodities, photographs, or the act of perception itself) to assume a mystified and abstract identity, sundered from any relation to the observer's position within a cognitively unified field," Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), p 19

<sup>61</sup> Hayles, 1999, p 196

While cybernetics has influenced philosophy and literary theory ever since its initial formulation in the 1940s, and particularly within deconstructive and poststructuralist theories, as will be discussed later in this chapter, it is nevertheless the case that wider and more comprehensive applications of cybernetics within the humanities and social sciences can be discerned in the decades after the 1990s. Regarding the present argument, it is primarily the cybernetic theories stressing embodiment and the material aspects of cognition that are of interest. Here the theory of autopoiesis is of seminal importance. Whereas the theory of autopoiesis, as has been pointed out by Hayles, in part seems to invite a notion of subjectivity as homeostatic and autonomous, it is also a theory that investigates emergent systems.<sup>62</sup> Against the tendency within some theories of autopoiesis towards a disembodied version of information (and of the posthuman), there is also an emphasis on the relation between systems and their environment within second-order systems theory, and in the neocybernetics theories of emergence developed in its wake. To a large degree, it would seem that Hayles' insistence on the embodied aspects of cognition, together with Haraway's notions of situated knowledge and sympoiesis, can be accommodated within a neocybernetic model of emergence and embodiment. As will become apparent in the subsequent discussion, this is how the term *sympoiesis* is used in this thesis, not to present a new and ecological version of second-order systems theory, but to emphasize the reflexivity of system and environment already articulated (albeit sometimes downplayed) within the theory of autopoiesis.

## Autopoiesis

In the "second wave" of cybernetics of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the function and role of the observer in cybernetic systems became the center of attention.<sup>63</sup> Not only observing the feedback of a system and its environment, cybernetic theories now started to factor the cybernetic effects of observation itself, acknowledging that the observer "does not so much discern preexisting systems as create them through the very act of observation."<sup>64</sup> Thus cybernetic theories of second-order observation further stress a conceptual apparatus that challenges modern West-

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<sup>62</sup> In her historical and critical overview of information theory and cybernetics, Hayles argues that there is a tendency within the theories of cybernetics, from Claude Shannon's model of information as decoded noise to the second-order observation theories of von Foerster, and Varela and Maturana's notion of autopoiesis as a model for self-organizing and self-generating systems to conceptualize information and meaning as disembodied and abstract processes, privileging patterns over presence. *Ibid.*, p 146, p 285f

<sup>63</sup> Hayles discusses the history of cybernetics as three stages, or "distinct waves of development. The first, from 1945 to 1960, took homeostasis as a central concept; the second, going roughly from 1960 to 1980, revolved around reflexivity; and the third, stretching from 1980 to the present, highlights virtuality." *Ibid.*, 7

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p 131

ern epistemology – and not only the autonomy of the liberal-humanist subject but also, and in extension, notions of causality and closure. By factoring in the act of observing a system as integral to the generation of that very same system, perception becomes not only a matter of representing an environment but clearly also a question of creating environments. Observation and perception are in this sense a process of ontogenesis. Here the function of reflexivity is of utter importance, and particularly the extent to which reflexivity can be said to characterize the relation of system and environment.

Initially presented by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Valera in their co-authored study *Autopoiesis: The Organization of the Living* in 1973, the theory of autopoiesis describes how living systems – in addition to informational systems – function cybernetically.<sup>65</sup> From the very outset of the theory there seems, however, to be an ambiguous treatment of the exact relation between environment and system. Hayles ascribes this tension to the different proclivities of its co-authors, noting that Maturana stresses the autonomy of a self-regulating and self-generating system, in relation to the environment it creates, to a larger degree than Varela. Living organisms are operationally closed, argues Maturana, and relate to the environment in which they are enmeshed as an observing system following its own organization. In this sense, reflexivity is essential to cognition. “His key insight”, writes Hayles about Maturana, “was to realize that if the action of the nervous system is determined by its organization, the result is a circular, self-reflexive dynamic.”<sup>66</sup> The environment – and an external, objectively existing world – does not pre-exist an observing system, but rather observation comes about following a set of interactive processes that are determined by the organization of the system. Thus Maturana’s notion of autopoiesis stresses perception as an act of creation. But while the perceptual apparatus is organized in relation to an environment, this relation is altogether internal to the observing system and determined by that system’s own organization. Hayles writes:

Maturana concluded that perception is not fundamentally representational. He argued that to speak of an objectively existing world is misleading, for the very idea of a world implies a realm that preexists its construction by an observer. Certainly there is something ‘out there,’ which for a better term we can call ‘reality.’ But it comes into existence for us, and for all living creatures, *only through interactive processes determined by the organism’s own organization.*<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, *Autopoiesis and cognition: the realization of the living* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1973), Originally published in Chile as *De Maquinas y Seres Vivos*, in 1972

<sup>66</sup> Hayles 1999, p 136

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p 136

The external world – the environment – exists in a living system according to the specific organization by which that system perceives the environment, and the environment, according to that living system’s organization, is also what generates the system’s organization. Living systems – in order to keep on living, according to Maturana – are by necessity self-making, that is, autopoietic. It would appear that the relation between a living system and the environment in the theory of autopoiesis is, if not paradoxical, then at least highly convoluted. Maturana here seems to invite a solipsistic interpretation of autopoiesis, that while it clearly does not adhere to the objectivism of the liberal humanist subject – there is no position outside the world from which an observer can objectively observe – it nevertheless insists on an autonomous individuality that is closed to the environment in which is enmeshed. The main problem with Maturana’s strict notion of self-regulating and self-generating autonomy is then an explanation of how systems interact and how new organizations of autopoietic systems are created. If living systems are self-generating and merely observe, and at the same time generate, the environments prescribed by their internal organization, there seems to be little room for prefiguring the generation and emergence of new systems.<sup>68</sup> However, the operational closure of an autopoietic system is not equivalent to the self-possession of the liberal humanist subject, and it need not necessarily be taken as an indication of the autonomy of the system, although that is clearly what Maturana seeks to uphold.<sup>69</sup> Given a different interpretation of the relation between system and environment, the function of operational closure can instead shed light on the process of the emergence of new systems. Such an interpretation of autopoiesis is provided by neocybernetic theories and by the theory of sympoiesis. From a neocybernetic point of view, the autonomy of operational closure is what connects it to other systems and to an environment; it is a question of co-creation, of becoming-with, as Donna Haraway says. This is what sympoiesis adds to the theory of autopoiesis. The function of operational closure is the key to understanding how the theory of autopoiesis is relevant to the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic; operational closure in autopoietic systems can accordingly, and against the solipsistic autonomy of Maturana’s version of autopoiesis,

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<sup>68</sup> Hayles discusses the resistance to dynamic transformations inherent in Maturana’s version of autopoiesis and notes that a solution to emergence can possibly be found in his notion of how systems relate, as structural couplings, to one another. Hayles, 1999, pp 147-148

<sup>69</sup> Hayles argues, as already mentioned, that the operational closure of autopoietic systems in Maturana’s version of the theory serves the function of reinscribing “the autonomy and individuality of the liberal subject”. However, Maturana’s version of subjectivity, Hayles notes, does not insist solely upon self-consciousness but rather makes clear how consciousness is merely one amongst a great many autopoietic processes involved. In this sense Maturana’s version of autopoiesis supports autonomous individuality, while at the same time contesting the rationalist bias of liberal humanism. Hayles, 1999, p 145

explain how the secondary worlds of the fantastic are self-regulating systems while at the same time always engaged in creating new systems. To this extent, the theory of autopoiesis needs to be conceptualized within a neocybernetic framework.

## Neocybernetics

Neocybernetic systems theories situate the relation between systems and environment in the function of operational closure. Elaborating on the theory of autopoiesis, and on theories of second-order observation, neocybernetic theories and neocybernetic aesthetics argue an understanding of autonomy where systems are structurally coupled to an environment, and with other systems, by way of operational closure. To this extent, autonomy and subjectivity are posthumanist concepts, whereby not only humans or even living systems but also nonliving systems and environments have agency. Bruce Clarke and Mark Hansen write in the introduction to *Emergence and Embodiment* (2009), a collection of essays on neocybernetic theory:

Whether technical or biotic, psychic or social, systems are bounded semi-autonomous entities coupled *with* their environments and *to* other systems. One shifts attention from isolated elements and relations to the emergent behaviors of ever-larger ensembles. Neocybernetic systems theory stresses the recursive complexities of observation, meditation, and communication. Whatever comes to be (observed) owes its term of being to systems within its environment. Autonomy can never be solitary: in second-order systems theory autonomy is rethought as operational self-reference.

In brief, neocybernetics shifts the emphasis of observation and description from subject to system. One form of the neocybernetic turn is a shift of interest from the identities of subjects to the networks of connections among systems and environments. The humanist project that unified perception and communication in one subject, shored up against all odds by the first cybernetics, is now observed as an amalgamation or structural coupling of multiple observing systems. With this move the noumenal unity of the humanist subject gives way to a differential observation of the relations of living and nonliving systems and their environments, such as human and nonhuman bodies and societies.<sup>70</sup>

In neocybernetics the self-reference with which the operational closure and structural coupling of autopoietic systems construct environments is not closed or solipsistic. Rather, it is by virtue of its closure that a system remains open to an environment. This might appear paradoxical, and from the perspective of traditional humanist logic concerned with stable truth-values, it is. However, as Bruce Clarke

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<sup>70</sup> Bruce Clarke and Mark D. Hansen, "Introduction", in (eds.) Bruce Clarke and Mark D. Hansen, *Emergence and Embodiment: New Essays on Second-order Systems Theory* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2009), p 6

notes, neocybernetic systems function by a posthumanist logic by which this paradox is set to work: “The autopoietic process turns on itself, recursively: the organization enables the production that maintains the organization, and so on. Open to the material-energetic flux of its environment, an autopoietic system is closed or ‘information-tight’ in the sense that it is self-operating and autonomous.”<sup>71</sup>

Thus reading the comic book spread of *The Unwritten* is, from a neocybernetic point of view, an emerging event, where the subjectivity generated hinges on a self-regulating and self-observing system that in turn prescribes the conditions under which the material environment (i.e. comic book, reader, movement of body and pages, and so forth) comes into being. Once coupled to the comic book spread, reader and comic book alike become part of the environment of an autopoietic system. The pressing question is then: How does this coupling between autopoietic system and environment and other autopoietic systems – a coupling that evidently reconfigures humanist notions of agency as well as causality and temporality – come about? How is the paradoxical openness of operational closure to be understood?

Mark Hansen argues that in the light of the recent intensification of environmental complexity and the apparent technicity with which the environment is permeated, a purist notion of autopoiesis can no longer be sustained.<sup>72</sup> Instead, Hansen locates, alongside those systems that maintain “total closure to environmental agency”, certain kinds of systems that “realize their autonomy at a higher level of inclusiveness – which is to say *through a constitutive relation with alterity* – and that, for this reason, cannot be qualified as autopoietic.”<sup>73</sup> Hansen proposes to call these systems system-environment hybrids, or SEH for short. If not directly affected, within the organization of the system, by a relation to alterity, this relation nevertheless informs any system’s cognitive operation in the world, argues Hansen, and notes that in this sense, all systems, even autopoietic systems proper, are involved in concrete contexts. While Hansen finds it important to stress the distinction and differentiation effected by the operational closure of a system, he nevertheless insists on a reformulation of the way autonomy functions in relation to this distinction. Any concrete cognitive situation involves operational closure across several levels of complexity, argues Hansen. In this sense, operational closure is always a matter of co-operation across borders and scales. Furthermore, as any autopoietic system will be coupled to other systems and environments, closure involves selection: “closure here simply indicates that the operation of an SEH does not involve all aspects and possibilities of a system

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<sup>71</sup> Bruce Clarke, *Neocybernetics and Narrative* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p 5

<sup>72</sup> Mark B. N. Hansen, “System-environment hybrids”, in (eds.) Bruce Clarke & Mark D. Hansen *Emergence and Embodiment, New Essays on Second-order Systems Theory* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2009), p 114

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p 115



or of each system involved and that it does not involve all aspects of the environment, all possibilities for environmental agency.”<sup>74</sup> Closure involving system-environment hybrids – which in a given cognitive situation where systems are coupled with other systems and environments would entail any autopoietic system – is then, according to Hansen, a question of functional and technical closure, momentarily brought together by a set of selective agencies. The cognitive function is thus a matter of distributed cognition, and it is a distribution shared between living and nonliving systems alike; furthermore, it is a distribution that respects and presupposes borders and differentiations, that, in a word, respects and upholds alterity. Hansen finds a model for prefiguring autopoietic closure as the momentarily distribution of agencies in the ecological system theories of Félix Guattari and Gilbert Simondon. Guattari’s concept of “machinic heterogenesis” describes how different levels of autopoietic systems come together – whether biological or mechanic – and corresponds, claims Hansen, to the function of system-environment hybrids.<sup>75</sup> Ontogenesis and phylogenesis here mingle in the machinic function of the assemblage, in the machinic phylum, stressing the importance of a distribution that respects borders and difference and which prefigures emergence as heterogenetic, as an event Hansen calls *heteropoiesis*.<sup>76</sup> And through Simondon’s reframing of individuation as an emergent, cybernetic event, the openness to alterity on which the heteropoietic distribution of system-environment hybrids hinges, is framed as an essential component in the creation of new systems: “on Simondon’s account”, Hansen writes, “not only does the environment necessarily possess nontrivial agency in *every* process of individuation, but to the extent that this environmental agency carries the ‘energy’ that opens the unexpected it also plays the major role in all creative change.”<sup>77</sup> Here, the system-environment hybrid as a model for understanding operational closure becomes a productive middle-ground between the strictly autonomous closure of Maturana’s version of autopoiesis, and the dissolving of boundaries proposed by Hayles’ critique of autonomy and autopoietic closure. The closure of system-environment hybrids is characterized, argues Hansen, by technical closure, effective as long as the cognitive distribution lasts: “As such, technical closure allows the environment to exert

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p 118

<sup>75</sup> Félix Guattari, “Machinic Heterogenesis”, in (ed.) Verena Andermatt Conley, *Rethinking Technologies* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp

<sup>76</sup> With reference to cognitive theorist Andy Clark and his theorization of human-machinic cyborgs Hansen discusses human and machinic systems as cognitive distribution, as heteropoiesis. “By positioning environmental complexity as a crucial source for the cognitive operations in development of the human being understood both as embodied brain and as element in a larger distributed cognitive system, Clark embraces the introduction, at least in principle, of some measure of *heteropoiesis* into system operation.” Hansen, 2009, p 124

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p 127



its agency independently of and beyond the demands of system autopoiesis (closure more narrowly defined as autopoietic closure), including the autopoiesis of the living human agents that form a robust, nondivisible or integral component of so many (though, to be sure, by no means all) SEHS in our world today.”<sup>78</sup> Technical closure, and this is an important point, is always also a question of finitude, temporally limited, and as such, an event.

### **Feedback and control: the structural coupling of *The Unwritten***

In *The Unwritten* stories create worlds. Here the whale, the Leviathan that Tommy Taylor confronts in the spread discussed earlier, has the function of an observer. But as the comic book series progresses, what might first appear as a first-order cybernetic system of observation and control, in which the world is regulated by the observation of the whale, is instead to be understood as a neocybernetic system, where structural coupling emerges as a system-environment hybrid in which the whale too is observed. In the story arc “Tommy Taylor and the war of words”, collected in *The Unwritten 6* and comprising issues 31-35, the backstory of the Cabal is revealed. Secretly influencing the organization of the modern world, ubiquitously controlling governments and corporations alike, the Cabal has until now been presented as a sinister conspiracy typical of the popular postmodern urban fantasy genre. At this point, however, it is revealed that the Cabal’s real purpose – unknown to its own members – is to defeat and kill the Leviathan. At the center of this conspiracy within the conspiracy is a character known as Pullman, who has figured in the series as the Cabal’s main henchman and assassin. After magically dispatching with the inner circle of the Cabal, Tommy Taylor confronts Pullman in a subterranean labyrinth below the Radcliffe Camera in Oxford. Pullman here explains that he too is in a sense a creature partly generated by narrative, and as such not subject to the restraints of empirical reality. More precisely, he is the Biblical Cain, or at least he once, some five thousand years ago, at the birth of human civilization, killed his brother and was subsequently banished from society. Having since served as the focal point for stories about fratricide, Pullman claims to be immortal, and states that his sole purpose in life now is to die. But in order to do so, the Leviathan must first be killed. The reason he cannot die, Pullman explains, is that the Leviathan feeds on his story – as it feeds on Tommy Taylor’s story – and therefore makes sure to cultivate and reproduce it, thus keeping Pullman, and now Tommy Taylor, alive as fodder.

Throughout the ages Pullman, working within the Cabal, has hunted the Leviathan, initially in its monstrously physical appearance, and later, as the monsters of the real were increasingly relegated to the symbolic-cultural order, by controlling

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p 127

and suppressing creative expression. However, as he now explains, never before has he had “the right tool for the job”; that tool being the material-cultural assemblage of Tommy Taylor. The reasons Tommy can function as a “voodoo doll” through witch Pullman vicariously strikes at the whale (Figure 8), are connected with the way Wilson Taylor has incorporated the ecological feedback structure of narrative media into the identity of Tommy Taylor.



Figure 8: Mike Carey & Peter Gross *The Unwritten* #35

From the perspective of Pullman, narrative, and in extension culture, is an autopoietic system, in the strictest sense; it seeks to organize its environment in order to reproduce its own organization. New stories – and new individuals – are coupled to such a system only to the extent that they reproduce the system’s organization. Feedback is here strictly a question of control. And by controlling the new systems that are structurally coupled, the original organization would eventually cease to self-generate. At least, that seems to be the theory. Accordingly, Pullman, and the Cabal, have been using narrative as a means to control culture and society; that is, as an ideological tool, generating their own preferred version of reality, in the hope of either starving or subjugating the Leviathan. Whenever discordant and subversive forms of expression have surged, these have been suppressed, either by simple erasure and elimination, or by co-optation.

In the story arc “On To Genesis”, directly preceding “The War of Words” and

collected in *The Unwritten* 5, comprising issues 25-30, Wilson Taylor, Tommy's biological father and the author of the *Tommy Taylor* books, working for the Cabal in the capacity of erasing and eliminating unwanted narrative, meets Miriam Walzer, a young comic book artist living in Brooklyn. Initially with the intent of killing Miriam, Wilson realizes that to the comic book industry, on the brink of exploding in the US – the episode is set before the first issue of *Action Comics* in 1938 and the subsequent introduction of Superman and superhero comics – it is not just the stories that matter, but also, and perhaps more importantly, their form of distribution. The comic book as a media system is in a direct feedback relation to its environment. And within such a system, operating with a set of cultural archetypes that can be configured and combined in accordance with a feedback loop, a system-environment hybrid emerges in which the ontogenetic power becomes massive. Observing Miriam Walzer working with the proto-superhero character “The Tinker” – a character that later on in *The Unwritten* also becomes a character within the primary narrative – Wilson finds a method for integrating mythology with the new media system (Figure 9). Here structural coupling stresses the closure as a system-environment hybrid, as an ecosystem. Feedback configures both system and environment.

Figure 9: Mike Carey & Peter Gross,  
*The Unwritten* #28, cover art  
 by Yuko Shimizu



It is because Tommy is part of the ecosystem in which the material environment of narrative emerges that he can connect to the Leviathan, and function, as Pullman states, as “a voodoo doll”. By way of structural coupling Tommy can in this sense reorganize the ecosystem, effacing the Leviathan. However, as an ecosystem, the constitutive relation with alterity referred to by Hansen will, as the following sections of this chapter argues, linger as a remainder and a reminder of future structural couplings. Thus, while Pullman uses Tommy Taylor as a tool to strike at the Levia-

than, and on one level partly succeeds in his endeavor – the wound the Leviathan suffers becomes a major theme in the subsequent narrative – on another level this act only intensifies the structural coupling of different storyworlds and media systems of the fantastic, as crossovers and metaleptic transgressions between fictional universes emerges as perhaps the best possible counteragent.

### **Affect: perception-event**

The aesthetics of the fantastic is an aesthetics of affect. About this, virtually all theories of the fantastic, however disparate, seem to agree. The fantastic entails an embodied reaction; if not the doubt and uncertainty of Todorov's definition, then a sense of awe, fear and wonder is regularly ascribed to the fantastic condition.<sup>79</sup> Apart from emphasizing the function of corporeal sensation and affect, the fantastic is here also tied to the sudden emergence of a liminal state; it marks the affective relation to the fantastic as an event, a sudden breakthrough from a strange land. The metalepsis of Tommy Taylor's breaking of the fourth wall is one such event, marking the inauguration of the world as other.

An account of how the affective function – and in extension the participatory aesthetics – of the fantastic can relate to perception and emergence and embodiment will here be provided by the aesthetic theories of Brian Massumi. Massumi proposes an aesthetic philosophy centered on movement and process rather than objects. Cultural and social concepts are to be understood as processes, says Massumi.<sup>80</sup> That is, as cybernetic feedback systems – Massumi does not use cybernetic terminology but bases his argument largely on Simondon's ideas of emergence and on the cybernetically influenced theories of Deleuze and Guattari – concepts generate the environments they circumscribe, while at the same time being emergent properties of those very same environments. A concept is in this sense both abstract and real, both vir-

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<sup>79</sup> Kathryn Hume notes that notions of literary expression and ideas about artistic estrangement are central to the function of fantastic literature and that the most important responses to fantastic literature are affective, Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012 (1984)), p 26f, p 142, p 194f. Rosemary Jackson's Freudian-Marxist reading of the subversive power of the fantastic posits estrangement and arousal and fulfillment of desire as central to the fantastic, Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: the literature of subversion* (London: Meuthen, 1981), p 23, p 91. C. N. Manlove situates wonder as "a central feature of" epic fantasy, C.N. Manlove *Modern Fantasy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p 7. Brian Attebery also posits wonder as a central component of his influential theory of fantasy and ties the sensation to estrangement, Attebery, 1992, p 16. Richard Mathews initiates his investigation of fantasy by concluding: "Although it is difficult to define literary fantasy precisely, most critics agree it is a type of fiction that evokes wonder, mystery, or magic – a sense of possibility beyond the ordinary, material, rationally predictable world in which we live." Richard Mathews, *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p 1.

<sup>80</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), p 8

tual and actual. But more importantly, concepts – and subjectivities coextensive with concepts – are defined more by relation than by content. Accordingly, a concept is marked by its *affect* upon other concepts.<sup>81</sup>

Affects are virtual synesthetic perspectives anchored in (functionally limited by) the actually existing, particular things that embody them. The autonomy of affect is its participation in the virtual. *Its autonomy is its openness.* Affect is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is. Formed, qualified, situated perceptions and cognitions fulfilling functions of actual connection or blockage are the capture and closure of affect.<sup>82</sup>

The autonomy of affect is here clearly linked to the operational closure of (living) systems as prefigured by neocybernetics. Massumi points out that this paradoxical version of autonomy, contrary to first appearances, is the key to understanding affect and participation. Affects are open feedback loops.<sup>83</sup> Experience, and perception, emerges as an event that retroactively configures the circumstances – the environment – of its own emergence. This is how participation is to be understood, as a relation that is non-connective, in the sense that participation does not indicate connecting a number of elements that in turn causes a certain perception or experience to emerge; instead, it coincides with the emergence of experience:

The paradox of relation can be summed in the term *relation-of-nonrelation*. Elements contributing to an occurrence come into relation when they come into effect, and they come into effect in excess over themselves. In themselves, they are disparate. If they are in tension, it is precisely as a function of the differential between their positions. It is as a function of their distances from each other. The factors do not actually connect. Their distance is enveloped in a field effect that is one with the tension culminating in the strike of an event. The event effectively takes off from its element's contribution to it. As an extra-effect, it does not connect to them as its 'cause. It comes onto its own sheer individuality of occurrence: its little-absoluteness. The phrase relation-of-nonrelation is a way of holding together, in the concept of the event the differential status of its conditioning elements and the dynamic unity of their sheer occurrence as a little absolute.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p 20

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p 35

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p 191

<sup>84</sup> Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event, Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), p 20f



Participation entails affect and vice versa, but more importantly, cognition and experience presuppose participation. And further, participation emerges as ecological feedback, where the elements involved come into relation by the perception-event in which they participate. Perception is in this sense ontogenetic rather than ontological:

Every perception is a creative activity culminating in the production of an event of change. A perception is its own event. Its 'content' is one with the dynamic form of its coming to fulfillment. What a perception invents is essentially itself. There is nothing 'outside' to which it corresponds or that it reflects or represents. All perception is immanent – in the case of animal life, to the bodily milieu of its own becoming.<sup>85</sup>

Massumi's theories of affect and ontogenetic perception and his notions of eventness and emergence are compatible with a neocybernetic understanding of emergence. As noted earlier, in neocybernetic theory the relation between system and environment is one of emergence. Any system is open to its environment – in the form of a system-environment hybrid – to the extent that the emergence of system and environment is coextensive. It all happens at the same time, so to speak, in an event of distributed cognition. Furthermore, the heteropoiesis of operational closure, following Hansen, entails acknowledging different and distinct agencies involved in the event of emergence, while not reducing these agencies to causal relations. Agencies affect, but they do not connect, they are, in Massumi's term, in a relation-of-nonrelation. Only at the moment of distribution can agency be conferred, and only retroactively. Subjectivity is in this sense a momentary distribution of agencies, composed of, but not reducible to, the number of agencies involved. This is how the reader participates in the medium of the comic book spread of *The Unwritten*, where the metaleptic discourse of Tommy Taylor is part of a distributed perception involving the reader, only at the emergence of the perception of which the distributed agencies (reader, frames, comic book, character discourse, and so forth) are already part.

While the emergent perception of *The Unwritten* is not ambiguous in the sense of Todorov's definition of the fantastic – it does not vacillate between two (or more) versions of perception from a position outside the world – it is nevertheless clear that the emergence of perception, as a system-environment hybrid, as a perception-event, is tied both to participation and to the complex heterogeneity of any given context. Here, Massumi's notion of process and event, and Hansen's neocybernetic theory of system-environment hybrids and the heteropoiesis of emergence evince strong affinities with Hayles' ideas of embodiment as the emergence of a situated experience, and in extension with Haraway's ecocritical adaptation of autopoiesis as sympoiesis.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p 27

## The mingled senses of embodied perception

Before turning to the concept of sympoiesis, it is necessary to briefly delineate how a neocybernetic theory of embodiment conceptualizes sensation. It has already been noted, in the Introduction, that the aesthetics of the fantastic questions and reconfigures the traditional, humanist and empiricist hierarchical division of the senses. If perception comes forth as an event, as Massumi argues, the body and the senses – the embodiment of sensation – is to be understood as a process rather than as organized in discrete categories. In the comic book spread of *The Unwritten*, different regimes of sensation – vision, tactility, kinesthesia – come together and mingle. This is what Massumi alludes to as the synesthetic perspectives of affect. The emerging experience of participating in the perception of the comic book spread functions here as a reminder, as Caroline Jones notes, that “the senses are complex cognitive systems in which there is no clear separation between, for example, the ‘medium’ of air, the ‘message’ of sonic information, and the intricate body system that interprets sound waves as language”.<sup>86</sup> Instead, it could be argued that the senses function precisely by the operational closure of a system-environment hybrid, that is, as the environment to which perception is coextensive. The senses are thus to be understood as ecologically distributed in every event of perception. Here the cognitive function of the senses, as Marshall McLuhan and Friedrich Kittler famously, and from related but different perspectives, have pointed out, is similar to that of media.<sup>87</sup> However, a medium here must also be understood as a cybernetic and ecological system. This is what in Hayles’ argument invites a posthuman understanding of sensation, where the process of embodiment is one of feedback, dislocating the liberal humanist subject.<sup>88</sup>

Massumi argues that the senses as embodied processes of cognition function as *techniques of existence*, a term Massumi adapts from Simondon’s cybernetic theories of individuation: “A technique of existence is a technique that takes as its ‘object’ process itself, as the speculative-pragmatic production of events of change. Techniques of existence are dedicated to ontogenesis as such.”<sup>89</sup> Here, the senses come, retroactively, in a relation-of-nonrelation, participating in each other in the form of

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<sup>86</sup> Caroline Jones, “Senses”, in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, (eds.) W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 91

<sup>87</sup> Jones notes: “The senses both constitute our ‘sense’ of unmediated knowledge and are the first medium with which consciousness must contend. Media theorists can argue (as with Kittler) that the senses are an effect of media or (with McLuhan) that mediating technologies are ‘extensions of man.’ These two approaches – technological determinism (the body senses change radically with mediation) versus what we might call naturalization (the senses are grounded in the body and merely ‘extend’ their reach through mediating technologies) – stage the senses in a crucial arena for determining the effects of mediation on understanding.” *Ibid.*, p 88

<sup>88</sup> This is the argument in *How We Became Posthuman*, but the thesis is central to Hayles’ extended investigations into posthuman embodiment and cognition in later publications as well.

<sup>89</sup> Massumi, 2011, p 14

a distribution. This means understanding the senses as part of the environment pre-figured by the operational closure of a self-regulating, self-observing system, what in Massumi's terms amounts to an event of experience, that is, an ontogenetic perception-event. The senses are produced by the perceptions in which they are involved, while at the same time producing those very same perceptions. It is, however, says Massumi, important to maintain a notion of the senses as distinct and discrete, while at the same time acknowledging that sensation is always a process, temporal and spatial, in which different senses participate. Massumi takes the incessant movement of the eye – the saccadic movement – as an example of how sensation as process by necessity emerges in relation, in a spatial and temporal continuum.

To get an emergent figure, you need to add senses other than vision. In particular touch and proprioception, the registering of the displacement of body parts relative to each other. Say a varying complex of light-lines comes to the eye with a change in proprioception. Intersensory conjunction: the first complex of moving light-lines segues into another. With the new complex comes a feeling from an outstretched hand: intersensory conjunction. Say the two intersensory conjunctions repeat. Next, their repetition is anticipated. Habit. The anticipation is recursive, since it arises retrospectively from an iteration of already repeated line crossings and conjunctions. Habit is the actual experience of a before-after, in a continuity of present conjunction. Of course there are also smell and hearing. A panoply of before-afters merge and emerge out of each other, bearer of on of the other, folded together by habit. The folding together fuses an infinite continuum of potential crossings and conjunctions, before and afters, into the singularity of an event of perception.<sup>90</sup>

In the embodied perception of the comic book spread of *The Unwritten*, different senses mingle: movement, touch, vision. Emerging from this situation is a complex perception that entails a distribution of the sensual. The differentiation of this distribution is key. If perception as an event is ontogenetic, if perception functions following the posthumanist logics of system-environment-hybrid (non-causal) operational closure, it is essential, not least to the aesthetics of the fantastic, also to stress the heterogeneity of sensation. Only as a process, as emergence and embodiment, can perception accommodate the different senses in a relation-of-nonrelation. It is in fact only in a distribution of relation-of-nonrelation that perception becomes ontogenetic, at the moment when systems and environments are coextensive, where the senses as affective elements of perception are, in Hansen's term, heteropoietic. Conversely, an ostensive mixture of the senses – as in the synesthetic comic book

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p 95



spread of *The Unwritten* – functions as an indication, as a mark and a sign, of the ecological ontogenesis of perception. While all media function as system-environment hybrids, accordingly making an environmental heterogeneity an integral part of its operation and engaging a distribution of the senses, it is nevertheless the case that the aesthetics of the fantastic operationalizes this heterogeneity. And to the extent that other aesthetics also operationalize heterogeneity, as does for instance the aesthetics of postmodernism or the avant-garde aesthetics of Dadaism and surrealism, it could be argued that by this they too engage in ontogenesis. This is why, as Wilson Taylor seeks to imbue Tommy Taylor with ontogenetic powers he explicitly grafts in him a multitude of generic structures and cultural archetypes, and this is also why *The Unwritten* does the same.

One final note on the senses: viewing the senses as techniques of existence does not, however, add up to a traditional, empiricist and humanist understanding of the function and division of the human sensorium. The senses are not the means by which an outer world enters the human (or nonhuman) subject, nor are they a middle ground, or a single medium processing and structuring impression. The senses are rather to be understood, as Michel Serres points out, as the interlaced multiplicity of mixtures coinciding with the contingent “state of things”.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, techniques of existence encompass more than the traditional five (or six, counting proprioception) senses. In fact, any element relevant to the event of perception can potentially become a technique of existence; what is important is that its affect emerges as a relation-of-nonrelation, that is, that it emerges as a distribution of agencies. Most typically this is how art, in Massumi’s understanding of aesthetics, functions: as processes of interactive emergence. This is also why a neocybernetic understanding of distributed cognition and distributed subjectivity is important for the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic. This finally brings the exposition to the concept of sympoiesis and the theory of distributed agency.

### **Sympoiesis: the structural coupling of ecosystems**

The creation of a secondary world, a world in which Tommy Taylor exists, for instance, hinges on participating in an event of perception. Thus a participatory perception, functioning by the operational closure of a system-environment hybrid – that is, closure in the form of a perception-event where the environmental agencies involved are in a relation-of-nonrelation – presupposes perception, and subjectivity,

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<sup>91</sup> Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: a Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London and New York: Continuum, 2008), p 82. Serres notes further: “Contingency means common tangency: in it the world and the body intersect and caress each other. I do not wish to call the place in which I live a medium. I prefer to say that things mingle with each other and that I am no exception to that, I mix with the world which mixes with me. Skin intervenes between several things in the world and makes them mingle.” p 80

as process, as open-ended and in transit. In short, perception and subjectivity are prefigured as ecological feedback. Consciousness is a strange loop, as Douglas Hofstadter famously phrases it.<sup>92</sup>

Stressing the ecological aspect of cybernetic feedback, Donna Haraway has proposed the concept of sympoiesis, comports with her theories of feminist-cyborg subjectivity, situated cognition and the becoming-with of companion-species.<sup>93</sup> “Finally, and not a moment too soon, sympoiesis enlarges and displaces autopoiesis and other self-forming and self-sustaining system fantasies. Sympoiesis is a carrier bag for ongoingness, a yoke for becoming with, for staying with the trouble of inheriting the damages and achievements of colonial and postcolonial naturalcultural histories in telling the tale of still possible recuperation.”<sup>94</sup> Sympoiesis, according to Haraway, emphasizes the system-environment-hybridity that Hansen, and neocybernetics, evinces as a possibility within the theory of autopoiesis. As already noted, this is how the concept of sympoiesis becomes operative in a media-ecological approach to the aesthetics of the fantastic. Sympoiesis here is not in opposition to the theory of autopoiesis but rather brings to the fore ecological aspects latent to the operational closure and structural coupling of autopoiesis. Haraway writes: “As long as autopoiesis does not mean self-sufficient ‘self-making,’ autopoiesis and sympoiesis, foregrounding and backgrounding different aspects of systemic complexity, are in generative friction, or generative enfolding, rather than opposition.”<sup>95</sup>

Haraway uses the concept of sympoiesis in accordance with how it was initially presented by biologist Beth Dempster, namely as a heuristics to conceptualize the function of complex systems, where autopoiesis and sympoiesis are hypostasized as two alternate and contrasting but also ideal models – Dempster uses the term “caricatures” – on opposite ends of a “conceptual continuum.”<sup>96</sup> The closure of sympoietic systems, according to Dempster, is operationally open to other systems and environ-

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<sup>92</sup> Douglas Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach, 20th anniversary edition* (London: Penguin, 2000), p 709

<sup>93</sup> The article in which first presents the concept of sympoiesis, “Sowing Worlds: A Seed Bag for Terraforming,” was first published in *Beyond the Cyborg, Adventures with Donna Haraway*, edited by Margaret Grebowicz and Helen Merrick. A revised version of the article appears as Chapter 6 in Haraway, 2016. The concepts of feminist-cyborg subjectivity and situated knowledge are presented in Donna Haraway, *Cyborgs, Simians, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991) Chapter 8 and Chapter 9, and the inter-subjectivity of companion-species is presented in Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003).

<sup>94</sup> Haraway, 2016, p 146

<sup>95</sup> Haraway, 2016, p 61

<sup>96</sup> Beth Dempster, “Sympoietic and autopoietic systems: a new distinction for self-organizing systems”, paper presented at Proceedings of the World Congress of the System Sciences and ISSS, 2000, Toronto, Canada, pdf-version on Dempster’s website, <http://www.beth.ca/pubs/iss-as-sys.pdf>. Accessed April 23, 2017, p 1. Haraway’s use of the term “sympoiesis” was initially made independent of Dempster’s definition, which she comments on in *Staying with the Trouble*, recognizing Dempster’s definition, Haraway, 2016, p 33

ments; it is in her terms “organizationally ajar” (organizational closure here corresponds to operational closure): “A system which relies completely on external sources for determining its pattern of organization, such as a human made artifact, is organizationally open. A system that relies on external sources, yet limits these inputs in a self-determined manner, is organizationally ajar. For example, an ecosystem, which allows, but limits, the introduction of new species fits the latter description.”<sup>97</sup> While Dempster’s distinction between autopoietic and sympoietic systems relies largely on the role of an observer – an ecosystem in her understanding could also be described as a series of autopoietic systems structurally coupled by an observer – where she seems reluctant to acknowledge the possibility of non-human observation, she nevertheless makes several pertinent points. The notion of organizationally ajar systems seems to directly correspond to how Mark Hansen and Bruce Clarke prefigure the operational closure of neocybernetic systems. And Dempster’s emphasis on the sustainability of ecosystems points to the political and ethical implications of sympoiesis that Haraway and Massumi – but also, as will be discussed shortly in the following section, the ecological premises of the theory of media ecology – elaborate to some extent. The most relevant aspect, however, of Dempster’s argument, is that sympoiesis highlights systemic change and evolution. Sympoietic systems do not merely, if at all, reproduce organizational structures, argues Dempster, instead they are also always producing new patterns of organization. To this extent, sympoiesis maps how systems that are operational ajar – such as ecosystems – emerge, evolve and adapt to, as well as affect, the environments of which they are coextensive. While Dempster insists on viewing autopoiesis and sympoiesis as contrasting heuristics, noting that no actual system completely corresponds to either one, sympoiesis nevertheless suggests a model for prefiguring emergence, and in extension, creativity. “Autopoietic systems rely on organizational closure,” says Dempster, and continues, “emphasizing the need to maintain the status quo, whereas sympoietic systems use a continual flux of information, increasing their adaptability. The standard perception of stability – as homeostasis – reasonably reflects autopoietic system requirements, yet is inappropriate for sympoietic systems. While environmental uncertainty is anathema to autopoietic systems, it is an adaptive advantage for sympoietic systems.”<sup>98</sup> Accordingly, sympoiesis, perhaps more than a strict version of autopoiesis, seems attuned to the social systems with which the humanities traditionally engage. The becoming-with of sympoiesis, following Haraway’s argument, emerges here as a model for making worlds – for “wordling” – and for a material semiotics, where matter matters.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Dempster, 2000, p 4

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p 12

<sup>99</sup> “I am talking about material semiotics, about practices of worlding, about sympoiesis that is not only symbiogenetic, but is always a *sensible* materialism.” Haraway, 2016, p 88

Through the concept of sympoiesis, the agency of the material presence of things can supplement the meaning-oriented focus of traditional, modernist literary studies, offering a viable, and ecologically sustainable, trajectory for non-exclusive humanities: non-humanist (and in this sense posthumanist) humanities.

### **Vibrant matter: the (magical) agency of objects**

Magical objects are ubiquitous within the narratives of the fantastic. They abound in *The Unwritten* as well, and to a certain degree Tommy Taylor is such an object: a narrative fiction, a literary thing, manifest in language, paper, books and other materialities, come alive, an inanimate body of text that has become animated flesh, affecting and being affected by the world. Evidently, and as a metanarrative on the history of the fantastic, *The Unwritten* here forcibly argues that understanding the agency of things is central to understanding the aesthetics of the fantastic.<sup>100</sup> To this extent, Jane Bennett's theories on vital materiality and distributed agency aptly inform the theory of sympoiesis. Bennett theorizes agency as an emergent property not exclusive to the realm of the human, presenting a non-anthropocentric theory on the agency of things, arguing that agency is always composed of a distribution of "vital materiality". The material objects of the world are to be understood both as force and entity, says Bennett. Materiality is vibrant.<sup>101</sup> In this sense, things and bodies – human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic – are "heterogeneous assemblages", and agency accordingly hinges on how different materialities in relation affect and collaborate. "What this suggests for the concept of *agency*", says Bennett, "is that the efficacy or effectivity to which that term has traditionally referred becomes distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localized in a human body or in a collective produced (only) by human efforts."<sup>102</sup>

Bennett's argument focuses on how agency emerges as an event in distribution. In this distribution, things emerge as things with agency; whether these things are organic or non-organic, they nevertheless affect the objects with which they are in relation, and therefore become animate, or, in Bennett's words, "vibrant matter". Thus Bennett's notion of distribution stresses how objects, and materialities, are singular and individual inasmuch as they are in relation. The manner in which this distribution emerges corresponds to the operational closure of sympoietic systems, and the relation between agencies – Bennett refers to things with agency as *actants*, a concept that in Actor-Network-Theory is used to denote instances of agency without anthropomorphizing objects – is accordingly to be understood as a relation-of-non-

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<sup>100</sup> Todorov notes that the agency of things is a central theme of the fantastic. Todorov, 1975, p 113

<sup>101</sup> Bennett, 2010, p 20

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p 23

relation, affecting without connecting.<sup>103</sup> Emergence here hinges on the heterogeneity of material assemblages, and creativity and organizational change is in this sense, argues Bennett, to be understood as ecological, coalescing in non-anthropocentric political ecologies, the ontologically heterogeneous confederations of the “public”.<sup>104</sup> As an ecology of things, a sympoietic system is operationally ajar, it is – following Hansen – both system and environment, and can therefore accommodate the emergent causality and affect of a perception-event. This is how, argues Bennett, systems – such as ecosystems – can account for chance and underdetermined surplus. This is also, says Bennett, how literary bodies of text affect, equally as things and as systems: “I also proclaim that the effectivity of a text-body, including its ability to gesture toward a something more, is a function of a *distributive network* of bodies: words on the page, words in the reader’s imaginations, sounds of words, sounds and smells in the reading room, and so on, and so on – all these bodies co-acting are what do the job.”<sup>105</sup>

### **Media ecologies: world-creating feedback**

The fantastic narrates the agency of things, that is, it tells the story of when representations cease to represent and merely present their presence as affect. This is the moment when Tommy Taylor ceases to be a fiction and comes alive. Or rather, this is when the perception-event of the comic book spread evinces the agency of Tommy Taylor as a textual body, distributed in a relation-of-nonrelation to the other affective bodies of the medium. Following the argument of the present chapter so far, this emergence of distributed agency is characterized by the sympoietic closure of the comic book spread as an ecosystem, where system and environment are spatially and temporally coextensive. Here the perception-event – in which the reader participates sympoietically – is ontogenetic, it marks the creation of world. This is what the suspension of disbelief alluded to by Tommy Taylor entails: participating in the creation of world.

It is precisely this ontogenetic aspect of media that is of interest to the aesthetics of the fantastic. Following Jussi Parrika’s definition of media cited earlier, this is also how the concept of media will be operative in the argument, as a process where the operations of a medium affect and are affected by an environment. In this sense, and to all intents and purposes comporting as the “techniques of existence” prefigured by Massumi, media are always coupled to other media. A medium is thus always

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<sup>103</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp 53-55. Latour borrows the concept of actant from A. J. Greimas and his semiotic theory of literary actants.

<sup>104</sup> Bennett, 2010, p 123

<sup>105</sup> Jane Bennett, “Systems and Things”, in Richard Grusin (ed.) *The Nonhuman Turn* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), p 234

an ecology of media, a swirl of any given number of intersecting materialities, each functioning as a media system, situated in and at the same time constituting an environment. Accordingly, a medium, as John Durham Peters notes, can be understood as an infrastructure: it builds a world.<sup>106</sup> It is, however, never a self-contained world but always a world in relation, an ecosystem, that is, a system regulated by sympoiesis rather than autopoiesis. The concept of media ecology here serves as a model for the structural coupling of media systems.

The scholarly field of media ecology is not a consolidated field of scientific study. Rather, two contesting interpretations of the ecology metaphor dominate, which, while partly overlapping both theoretically and empirically, nevertheless seem to take different and largely incommensurable positions on a number of central concepts. To a large degree, the concepts under contest concern the same areas of theoretical conflict delineated by N. Katherine Hayles as central to a posthumanist notion of embodiment, subjectivity and autonomy.

While ecological and environmental notions of media have been circulating since – at least – McLuhan’s influential work in the 1960s, where an affective relation between media and their environments, including the human body and the sensorium, is a central tenet – it is nevertheless a decidedly different version of media ecology that will be actualized in the following. If media ecology, as conceptualized by research following McLuhan (though not necessarily faithfully so), particularly by Neil Postman and Christine Nystrom and their “school of media ecology”, investigates the intermedia relations between media and the impact of media-generated environments on the individual, it does so from a position of human exclusiveness, where subjectivity, though affected by media environments, is nevertheless autonomous and essential.<sup>107</sup> A notion of media ecology more relevant to the present argument, and to the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic, is found in Mathew Fuller’s already mentioned *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture*. Against environmentalist theories of ecosystems, positing a holistic, stable and basically harmonious notion of nature and the human, Fuller argues, from Simondon’s

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<sup>106</sup> John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), p 2f

<sup>107</sup> For a discussion on the different versions of media ecology, see Michael Goddard, “Towards an Archeology of Media Ecologies: Media Ecology, Political Subjectivation, and Free Radios”, in *The Fibreculture Journal*, no. 17, 2011. Goddard here discusses the media ecology school in which Postman and Nystrom were influential as a type of “liberal humanism” where Postman represents a “pre-McLuhane” notion of media, against which the media ecology of Mathew Fuller and new materialist, ecocritical and posthumanist theories of media are contrasted. In defense of the liberal humanist of the media ecology school, C. A. Scolari argues for the concept of the “interface” as a means to investigate, ecologically, the intermedia relations between media systems and delineates a history of the concept of media ecology that however omits any non-humanist formulations of media theory, C. A. Scolari “Media Ecology: Exploring the Metaphor to Expand the Theory”, in *Communication Theory*, 22, 2012

theories of individuation and Guattari's ecocriticism, as well as from enabling assemblage theory and Gibson's theory of ecological perception and media affordances, a notion of media ecologies as operationally ajar systems of emergent heterogeneity.

Fuller's concept of media ecology is non-humanist. That is, Fuller's theory positions human subjectivity as contingent on "the ontogenetic and reality-forming nature of media" as embodied processes, emerging in "the massive and dynamic interrelation of processes and objects, beings and things, patterns and matter" that characterizes ecologies.<sup>108</sup> Thus media ecology maps how different media interact and affect, but also how these interactions and affects relate to – or rather create – a world. Following Simondon, Fuller argues that media do not relate form to matter, but rather function as a "process of individuation, whereby materials produce their own capacities of formation in relation to the morphogenetic affordances around them."<sup>109</sup> In this manner, media function as machinic assemblages, which implies that any object or process can become a medium, including organic objects, but also processes such as discursive practices and protocols. This is what characterizes the machinic phylum, a concept Deleuze and Guattari use to denote the operational realm of assemblages and define as "materiality, natural and artificial, and both simultaneously; it is matter in movement, in flux, in variation, matter as conveyor of singularities and traits of expression."<sup>110</sup> Fuller cites the machinic phylum as a model for how media relate across different domains.<sup>111</sup> The machinic phylum operates by (at least) two modes, says Fuller. First, it functions as a "nonreducible topological spatium" evolving through time:

This is what can be understood as its phase-space, the map of all possible combinations of its affordances.

This first sense of the phylum, though, is complicated by a second, without which it would be necessarily static. The machinic phylum is also produced in the dynamic and nonlinear combination of drives and capacities that, stimulating each other to new realms of potential, produce something that is in virulent excess of the sum of its parts. Indeed such parts can no longer be disassembled; they produce an ecology. Not a whole, but a live torrent in time of variegated and combinatorial energy and matter.<sup>112</sup>

To this extent, it is the machinic phylum that makes it possible to treat media as ecologies, where media relate and are operative across different strata and domains:

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<sup>108</sup> Fuller, 2005, p 2

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p 18

<sup>110</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 2004, p 451

<sup>111</sup> Fuller, 2005, p 17

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p 173



the machinic function of media is here what enables the structural coupling of media systems. Furthermore, Fuller's theory of media ecology actualizes Guattari's reformulation of environmentalist ecology, where Guattari by the concept of *machinic heterogenesis* stresses how the machinic phylum can operate as a model for a "generalized ecology"<sup>113</sup>. Such a generalized ecology would not privilege any homogenizing structuring principle, as would an environmentalist or a humanist notion of ecology, where ecosystems are autonomous in the strictest sense of autopoiesis.<sup>114</sup> Instead machinic heterogenesis functions by the operationally ajar closure of sympoietic systems, organizationally affecting and being affected by environments.<sup>115</sup> The three interrelated ecologies prefigured by Guattari's *ecosophy* – the environment, social relations and human subjectivity – in this sense "originate from a common ethico-aesthetic principle, and are also distinct from the point of view of the practices that characterize them. Their different styles are produced by what I call heterogenesis, in other words, processes of continuous resingularization."<sup>116</sup>

A posthuman, non-humanist, non-anthropocentric media ecology, following Guattari and Fuller, accordingly emphasizes several aspects relevant to the neocybernetic and ecological understanding of media delineated in this chapter so far.<sup>117</sup> First of all, any object has the capacity to become a medium. Second, it is when coupled with

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<sup>113</sup> Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), p 35

<sup>114</sup> "One might object that large-scale struggles are not necessarily in sync with ecological praxis and the micropolitics of desire, but that's the point: it is important not to homogenize various levels of practice or to make connections between them under some transcendental supervision, but instead engage them in processes of *heterogenesis*." Ibid., p 34

<sup>115</sup> Elaborating on Varela's distinction of allopoiesis (that is, systems that produce other systems) and autopoiesis, Guattari notes its shortcomings when faced with emergence and proposes an alternative description of systemic coupling: "In fact, Varela reserves the qualification 'autopoietic' for the biological domain. Social systems, technical machines, crystalline systems, and so forth are excluded from the category. That is the sense of his distinction between allopoiesis and autopoiesis. But autopoiesis, which thus encompasses only autonomous, individuated, and unitary entities that escape relations of input and output, lacks characteristics essential to living organisms, such as being born, dying, and surviving through genetic phyla. It seems to me, however, that autopoiesis deserves to be rethought in relation to entities that are evolutive and collective, and that sustain diverse kinds of relations to alterity, rather than being implacably closed in upon themselves. Thus institutions, like technical machines, which, in appearance, depend on allopoiesis, become ipso facto autopoietic when they are seen in the framework of machinic orderings that they constitute along with human beings. We can thus envision autopoiesis under the heading of an ontogenesis and phylogenesis specific to a mecanosphere that superimposes itself on the biosphere." Guattari, 1993, p 17

<sup>116</sup> Guattari, 2014, p 47

<sup>117</sup> Levi R. Bryant proposes a similar notion of media as ecosystems, stressing the that media function as open machines, that are structurally coupled, following the arguments of Guattari and Simondon discussed in this chapter. Bryant's argument coincides with the present on several important points, highlighting the ontogenetic qualities of media. Levi R. Bryant, *Onto-Cartography, An Ontology of Machines and Media* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p 6ff



other media systems that a media system emerges as an event of ontogenetic perception. And thirdly, this emergence is not restricted by the notion of the human as an exclusive domain.

### **Sympoiesis and the aesthetics of media ecologies**

Returning briefly to the comic book spread of *The Unwritten*, it is now possible – tentatively and provisionally, naturally, but nevertheless possible – to offer a definition of the aesthetics of media ecologies. Following the neocybernetic arguments of Mark Hansen and Bruce Clark, and in alignment with the definition of sympoiesis, it has been argued that ecosystems are operationally ajar. Ecosystems are system-environment hybrids. This is what enables structural coupling. And more importantly, the structural coupling of ecosystems, that is, of sympoietic systems, is what enables the emergence of new patterns of organization. Media ecologies then describe the manner in which media systems affect and are affected by other media systems, and the form this takes is that of the operationally ajar closure of sympoiesis. Accordingly, media ecologies enact the process of becoming, within and of an environment, and a media ecological approach focuses on what media systems do when forming structural couplings, rather than what these couplings mean. Furthermore, the heterogeneous character of this process has been emphasized repeatedly. Hansen describes the operational closure of system-environment hybrids as heteropoiesis. And Masumi, in describing the emergence of a perception-event, stresses the importance of a differentiated milieu where affects are in a relation-of-nonrelation. Jane Bennett's theory of distributed agency and vibrant materiality equally argues the heterogeneity of assemblages, while Hayles' concept of embodiment clearly prefigures embodiment as a process enmeshed in a complex environment of intersecting agencies.

Turning once again to the comic book spread of *The Unwritten*, where the metalepsis of Tommy Taylor's discourse signals the presence of a number of intersecting agencies, the contours of a media ecological aesthetics can now be traced. To start with, it is clear that the participation of the reader is here more than a metaphor. Participation is embodied and material, where the function of the reader as media system coupled to the media system of the comic book spread is retroactively enforced by the explicit and ostensive heterogeneity of the spread. Representing sensation, and particularly the movement and gaze of the represented figure Tommy Taylor, the movement and gaze of the reader becomes part of the media system with which the reader is already coupled. The emergence of the perception-event here follows the operational closure of sympoiesis, meaning that the environment with which the reader participates is already a product of that very same participation. The reader of the comic book spread does not connect different intersecting media systems into a coherent whole but is already part of a distribution of agencies, in an ecological

relation-of-nonrelation. In this sense, there is no outside from which to read and interpret, but reading is already something being done, to the reader and by the reader. This process of becoming, Fuller argues, is characterized by machinic heterogenesis: “The work uses combinations of machines, layers protocols, devices and drives but cannot entirely be said to be composed by their nonpredeterminate interplay”, this is why, as Fuller sums up the incessant proliferation of ecological sympoiesis in a beautiful and pregnant formulation, “[a] media ecology is a cascade of parasites.”<sup>118</sup>

The aesthetics of media ecologies would seem to imply participating in the emergence of a heterogenous object, which while it has a distinct material presence, is also clearly categorized by its eventness as perception-event. This perception-event maps a given distribution of agencies, retroactively organizing an environment as, in Hansen’s words, a *selection*, meaning that the operationally ajar closure of sympoiesis always marks a relation to alterity, to the remainder not actualized by a given distribution. Accordingly, the aesthetic object of media ecologies is an object in transition. This has a familiar ring to it, echoing established, modernist and postmodernist aesthetic concepts such as art as estrangement and disruption, or art as event and non-identity, while at the same time making heterogeneity – albeit not necessarily in the form of hermeneutic ambiguity – a central component of aesthetic experience.

### **The Role of the Reader: Iser, Eco, Barthes**

To what extent, then, does a media-ecological notion of aesthetic experience differ from already established notions of aesthetics? It seems pertinent here, as a brief aside, to elaborate on how a media-ecological version of aesthetic participation and openness differs from more established aesthetic categories that appear to be theorizing similar phenomena. Of particular relevance to the argument are hermeneutical and phenomenological reader-response theories, most prominently as presented by Wolfgang Iser and Umberto Eco, and Roland Barthes’ notion of textual play and the adjacent categories of readerly/writerly.

Iser’s theory on the aesthetics of reader response was initially motivated by what he perceived as the lingering presence in literary theory, in the early 1970s, of “the classical norm of interpretation”, that is, the notion that literature, as well as art, is ultimately a question of meaning content, and more precisely, that the literary and artistic work contains, and even to a degree hides, a certain given meaning that only a particularly expert kind of interpretation can uncover.<sup>119</sup> This idealist notion of meaning and interpretation does not answer to the complex function of literature, says Iser. Instead, the production of meaning in a literary work is a dynamic event

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<sup>118</sup> Fuller, 2005, p 174

<sup>119</sup> Iser, 1980, p 10

that requires the reader's active involvement. To this extent, the literary work presents itself to the reader as consisting of any number of structurally ordered, meaning-making units that could be either textual – perspectives, moods, voices, and so on – or contextual – generic, historical, social, and so on – from which the reader assembles the meaning of the work. In this process, which in Iser's theory involves a number of complex transactions between reader and text, as well as between text and context, there emerge, as an effect of the reader's interaction with the literary text, a number of "blanks" between meaning-making units. It is primarily to these blanks that the reader responds, thus connecting different textual segments and thereby assembling the meaning of the work.<sup>120</sup> The activity of assembling meaning is not arbitrary, says Iser; it is not merely subjective but is steered by how the reader is affected by the work in question: "If the blank is largely responsible for the activities described, then participation means that the reader is not simply called upon to 'internalize' the positions given in the text, but he is induced to make them act upon and to transform each other, as a result of which the aesthetic object begins to emerge. The structure of the blank organizes this participation, revealing simultaneously the intimate connection between this structure and the reading subject."<sup>121</sup>

In order to theorize the connection between the reading subject and the structure of the literary work, Iser introduces a remodeled version of Booth's implied reader. The position of Iser's implied reader is somewhere in-between subject and object, closed and open at the same time, though "firmly planted in the structure of the text; he is a construct and is no way to be identified with any real reader."<sup>122</sup> All the same, it seems to be through this construct that a reader – and here Iser appears to be talking about a real, and historically situated and embodied reader – participates in the work, and not merely as a means to ground an interpretation. The implied reader is in this sense constituted by a "network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text."<sup>123</sup> In many ways, the participatory function of the implied reader as stipulated by Iser seems to coincide with how participation functions according to the operationally ajar closure of ecosystems. The implied reader continually adjusts his/her position vis-à-vis the text, in response to discrepancies and deficiencies arising in relation to the potential assembled meaning of the text, all the while affecting the text itself, and the blanks of the text, that in turn will further determine future structured responses.<sup>124</sup> This relation is described as a "self-regulating system" where a

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<sup>120</sup> "The blanks make the reader bring the story itself to life – he lives with the characters and experiences their activities," Ibid., p 192

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p 203

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p 34

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p 34

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p 38

feedback between text and reader affects the organization of both.<sup>125</sup> Here the participatory function of the implied reader opens up to a non-humanist interpretation of subjectivity: this is, however, an interpretation that Iser chooses not to accept the full implications of. Therefore, his notion of participation, in the end stressing the necessity of a transcendental position from which to assemble the configurative meaning provoked by the textual (and cybernetically generated) blanks of the literary work, ultimately remains within a liberal humanist notion of subjectivity. Nonetheless, there are clear affinities between Iser's theory and the neocybernetic notion of participation employed by a media-ecological aesthetics: "Thus the reader's communication with the text is a dynamic process of self-correction, as he formulates signifieds which he must then continually modify. It is cybernetic in nature as it involves a feedback of effects and information throughout a sequence of changing situational frames; smaller units progressively merge into bigger ones, so that meaning gathers meaning in a kind of snowballing process."<sup>126</sup> Not only is the dynamic relation between text and reader characterized as an event challenging the division between subject and object, it is also clearly sympoietic, although Iser's final insistence on the transcendental position of ideation opts to deny the full ramifications of that sympoiesis.

What is salient when reframing Iser's theory in a neocybernetic context is that the main problem with the theory is the lingering presence of those very same transcendental notions of meaning and interpretation that the theory sought to displace at the outset. Evidently, Iser's version of meaning-making is highly sophisticated and much more complex than the naïve notion of meaning content he ascribes the "classical norm of interpretation". But while the theory of literary blanks purports meaning as a dynamic and evolving process, intersubjective and contextual in character, it is nevertheless apparent that the ideal outcome of this process is obtaining the transcendental position from which the reader can "formulate the cause underlying the questioning of the world", which also is the ultimate, subversive effect of the literary work.<sup>127</sup> Thus Iser repeatedly insists that although participation implies meaning as a contingent, immanent process, a proper literary work is nevertheless characterized by this transcendental position: "This is the ultimate function of the aesthetic object: it establishes itself as a transcendental viewpoint for the positions represented in the text – positions from which it is actually compiled and which it now sets up for observation."<sup>128</sup> To this extent, merely participating in the literary work, responding and producing literary blanks, and assembling segments of text, is not sufficient –

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p 67, p 150

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p 67

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p 230

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.,p 98

this is what amounts to the “light reading” of popular and commercial literature; a qualified aesthetic experience must also be correlated by a corresponding qualified meaning content. Here, Iser’s theory, for all its apparent stress on participation and critique of the subject-object division of interpretation, is nevertheless clearly marked by a strong linguistic bias, where the material presence of a cultural object is of less importance than what it signifies.<sup>129</sup> Affect is here first and foremost motivated by meaning content and not material presence.

While the residues of a similar linguistic bias can be traced in Umberto Eco’s theories of the open literary work, it is at the same time evident that Eco, even to a larger extent than Iser, incorporates aspects of cybernetic theories in his notion of participation. Eco stipulates the aesthetic object as an open work, as a work “in movement”, characterized by “the invitation to make the work together with the author”, which while being “organically completed, are ‘open’ to a continuous generation of internal relations which the addressee must uncover and select in his act of perceiving the totality of incoming stimuli.”<sup>130</sup> Whereas all aesthetic objects invite a potentially unlimited amount of situated interpretations, it is nevertheless the case, states Eco, that some objects enforce this characteristic more strongly than others. Openness and movement thus become critical criteria by which to evaluate the aesthetic object: “If, as I have shown, the openness of a work of art is the very condition of aesthetic pleasure, then each form whose aesthetic value is capable of producing such pleasure is, by definition, open – even though its author may have aimed at a univocal, unambiguous communication.”<sup>131</sup> In an open work that stresses movement the reader participates in the construction of the work, and such a work, argues Eco, will contain the larger amount of information.<sup>132</sup>

There is, however, never any question, in Eco’s theory, of there not being a clear and strict hierarchy, where the author is primary. Participation, even taking the form of performing the text, is largely a question of interpretation. At least as long as the dominant cultural paradigm favors intentionality before materiality, and to this extent, within the dominant hermeneutic field in which Eco’s theory is formulated, participation takes the form of a dialectics.

Thus, even an art that upholds the values of vitality, action, movement, brute matter, and chance rests on the dialectics between the work itself and the ‘openness’ of the ‘readings’

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<sup>129</sup> This is particularly evident in Iser’s discussion of the function of images, and how images relate to perception and ideation. *Ibid.*, p 137f

<sup>130</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p 21

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p 39

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p 93

it invites. A work of art can be open only insofar as it remains a work; beyond a certain boundary it becomes mere noise.

To define this threshold is not a function of aesthetics, for only a critical act can determine whether and to what extent the 'openness' of a particular work to various readings is the result of an intentional organization of its field of possibilities. Only then can the message be considered an act of communication and not just an absurd dialogue between a signal that is, in fact, mere noise, and a reception that is nothing more than solipsistic ranting.<sup>133</sup>

Accordingly, the principal form of openness in Eco's analysis is that of epistemological multi-valence, presenting the text as hermeneutical aporia.<sup>134</sup> Likewise, Iser argues that texts that are explicit in what they mean do not elicit participation and engagement to the same degree, if at all, as epistemologically difficult texts, where the meaning of what is said is more obscured.<sup>135</sup> A similar notion of how reader participation relates to particularly complex texts is found in Roland Barthes' theories on textual play. Barthes makes the distinction between readerly and writerly texts, that is, texts that can be read and consumed as commodities on the one hand and texts that demand participation, that cannot merely be read but rather need to be performed or played: "In fact, *reading*, in the sense of *consuming*, is not *playing* with the text. 'Playing' must be taken here in all the polysemy of the term: the text itself 'plays'", says Barthes, and adds that "the reader plays twice over: he *plays at* the Text (ludic meaning), he seeks a practice which reproduces it; but, so that this practice is not reduced to a passive, interior *mimesis* (the Text being precisely what resists this reduction), he *plays* the Text".<sup>136</sup>

From a neocybernetic point of view, the reader engages in structural coupling when accessing a text. In this sense, reading is a question of becoming part of an emergent ecosystem. While this is a basic fact for all kinds of reading, the feedback of this structural coupling can be highlighted to varying degrees.

## **Ontogenesis: creating ecosystems**

To sum up, it would appear that while many aspects of the aesthetics of media ecologies are familiar to a modern (and postmodern) discourse on aesthetic participation, the basic non-humanist tenet of the theory nevertheless implies that certain central elements related to the concept of autonomy need to be rethought. What is perhaps

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p 100

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p 41

<sup>135</sup> Iser, 1980, p 46

<sup>136</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), p 62f

most clear here is the linguistic bias of theories of aesthetic participation, where linguistic models for sign systems imply a logocentric hierarchy of media. However, reframing Iser's and Eco's theories within neocybernetic theory clearly establishes a continuity to an aesthetic tradition. To this extent, the argument follows Cary Wolfe's claim that neocybernetic (posthumanist) theory does not so much invalidate or criticize postmodernist and deconstructive theory as it sketches a genealogy and highlights affinities.<sup>137</sup>

If media are ontogenetic ecosystems – in the sense that the concept has been delineated in this chapter – and if participation is characterized by the operationally ajar closure of the structural coupling of an ecosystem, as has been argued, a media-ecological aesthetics will accordingly focus on movement and affect rather than on objects and subjects. A media-ecological aesthetics maps the becoming of worlds rather than worlds themselves; it is occupied with ontogenesis rather than ontology. As Roger Whitson and Jason Whittaker point out in their, to the present argument, highly influential study on the participatory aesthetics of William Blake, *William Blake and the Digital Humanities: Collaboration, Participation and Social Media* (2013), creativity here becomes a collective and collaborative activity, crossing borders not only between the human and the non-human but between the animate and the inanimate as well. Investigating and theorizing a non-humanist notion of collaboration and participation entails, as Whitson and Whittaker argue, treating cultural objects as objects in distribution, operating as flat ontologies where all objects are ontologically equal. As the following brief look into the critical discourse of the fantastic will make clear, their notion of collaboration is of great importance to a non-humanist reformulation of the theory of the fantastic.

For us, flat ontology reconfigures the hierarchical and epistemological model that dominates reception studies where the author's original expression is compared with his or

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<sup>137</sup> Wolfe's argument is that the posthumanist theory of neocybernetics and second-order systems theories, particularly through the work of Niklas Luhman, supplements the critical work done by deconstruction. Wolfe does not seek to rethink systems theory from a deconstructive (and in extension humanist) point of view but rather stresses how systems theory, while coinciding with the critique of Western metaphysics effectuated by deconstruction, also offers a more acute critique of Western anthropocentric humanism and of the liberal humanist subject: "Rather, my emphasis here will be on the usefulness of viewing second-order systems theory as (to use Luhman's characterization) 'the reconstruction of deconstruction' That project hinges on systems theory's extraordinary rigorous and detailed account of the fundamental dynamics and complexities of meaning that subtend the reproduction and interpenetration of psychic and social systems. And systems theory then takes the additional step of linking these dynamics to their biological, social and historical conditions of emergence and transformation, a crucial move that, as Gunther Teubner has argued, deconstruction either cannot or will not undertake." Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p 8



her adaptation in other contexts and interpreted by the critic. By contrast, we imagine the entity “William Blake” as an ontologically democratic network or society made up of everything from the ideas that inspired Blake to the material objects he used in his artwork, the animals and plants he ate, and the individuals who were influenced by his work. By creating new work, artists who adapt William Blake are actively adding to and transforming his network. The historical person named “William Blake” is only one node in an increasingly complex society that continually defines and redefines what it is that is referred to when the name Blake is uttered.<sup>138</sup>

## 2. Theories of the Fantastic: the ecosystems of genre

Tommy Taylor’s allusion to Coleridge’s treatise on imaginative poetry (Figure 7) is no mere coincidence, of course. If nothing else, it is a testament to the metanarrative aspects of the fantastic. Disregarding, for the moment, the fact that *The Unwritten* is a comic book, and in this sense functions as a different material medium than the type printed book, it also highlights one of the most central questions for the literary fantastic, namely the historical function of genre as a system for storytelling. In fact, *The Unwritten* reads as a critical history of the fantastic and its place in the Western literary system, stressing – as is argued here – from a media-ecological standpoint that the very notion of genre as it has been traditionally applied in the humanities needs to be reformulated. Literary genres are here made to function as media systems, ecologically, that is, operationally ajar. As the story of Tommy Taylor unravels, *The Unwritten* explicitly merges not only fantasy, horror and science fiction but also a large array of other genres connected to the fantastic – animal fantasy, children’s fantasy, superhero comics, fairy-tale, myth and so on. In this manner, *The Unwritten* presents a genealogy of the fantastic, drawing on affinities in stories of the supernatural within Western cultural history, from Gilgamesh to Harry Potter. Accordingly, *The Unwritten* establishes an ecology of coupled systems of vast temporal and spatial extension, a system that by its very coupling argues a history in the form of an ecosystem. This entails, as will be argued in the following, a radically dynamic notion of literary genres, and in extension, of literary history.

### Participatory genres

In his essay “The Law of Genre”, Jacques Derrida delineates two approaches to genre. The first approach is formalist and structuralist, seeking in its systematization of genre to naturalize generic structures, turning them into frameworks for categorizations

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<sup>138</sup> Roger Whitson & Jason Whittaker, *William Blake and the Digital Humanities, Collaboration, Participation and Social Media*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), p ?



and taxonomies. The second approach is deconstructive, poststructuralist, pointing out how the law of genre – a law that draws boundaries around sets and groups, claiming, in essence, the purity of genres, that genres should not be mixed – is always accompanied by a counter-law, a law of contamination and impurity, an impetus to hybridity. Derrida's notion of genre has been a guiding principle for recent – post-classicist – genre theory, in its various attempts to trace not only how genres evolve but also how individual texts produce meaning within generic systems.

Derrida discusses how a literary text, in order to be meaningful, always already adheres to a generic system, while at the same time emerging as a singular event: “a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging.”<sup>139</sup> The crux, obviously, lies in analyzing how this participation without belonging comes to pass. Every literary text, in fact every speech act, says Derrida, needs to participate in a genre, in order to be understood. In one way or another, a text makes its generic setup clear to its audience, signaling that it will behave in such and such a manner, following the contextually situated expectancies of a given situation. If it fails to do so, it simply does not make sense. As a situated experience – and this is also one of Derrida's points, claiming the situatedness of the literary experience against the universalizing tendency of genre criticism, namely that every text, and every genre, is always contextually and historically situated – a text and a genre involves its audience in an event that is both singular and general.<sup>140</sup> A text marks its belonging to a genre. However, this mark performs as a “re-mark”, says Derrida, a mark that has in advance been designated to stand out from the text. Thus the mark of genre both belongs and does not belong to the genre of the text, producing, as Derek Attridge summarizes, “a moment at which the categories of form and content, inside and outside, break down; another intimation of the anterior movement – the trace, *différance*, supplementarity – that both produces and restricts the categories of philosophy.”<sup>141</sup> Derrida here uses set theory to point out the paradoxical status of the literary text – and, in extension, of every intelligible speech act. The mark of genre does not belong to the

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<sup>139</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre”, in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p 65

<sup>140</sup> Derek Attridge points out how Derrida, throughout his writings on literature, consistently argues the situatedness of the literary experience, against philosophical readings of literature where commentary strives for the uncovering of origins and general meaning: “Against this transcendentalizing and universalizing tendency, Derrida tries to do justice to the literary text as radically *situated* – written and read and re-read at particular times – and as possessing a singularity (each time) which can never be reduced by criticism or theoretical contemplation”. Derek Attridge, “Introduction”, in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, trans. Derek Attridge, (London: Routledge, 1992), p 15

<sup>141</sup> Derrida, 1992, p 16

set it delineates; thus every genre always already bears the trace of another genre. This trace constitutes not only the text and the genre but also the reader. The text participates in a genre – or rather, it participates in several genres – and the reader is made part of this participation. Here, Derrida’s notion of genre and text – and more specifically the notion of participation without belonging that constitutes the trace of the other consistently investigated in Derrida’s writings – aligns to a sympoietic understanding of aesthetic participation. It is at this point, following Cary Wolfe’s argument discussed earlier in this chapter, that Derrida’s deconstruction converges with second-order systems theory. The singularity of the event here is in relation to its environment in the form of the operationally ajar closure of an ecosystem, and it is by the paradoxically open closure of sympoiesis that genres participate without belonging. A genre is in this sense a media system and, accordingly, an ecosystem.

### **Tommy Taylor and genre**

In *The Unwritten: Tommy Taylor and the Ship That Sank Twice* from 2014, the only story arc of *The Unwritten* to be published directly in trade paperback, the heterogeneity of emerging subjectivity is explicitly presented as a decisive moment in the creation of fantastic narratives. *Tommy Taylor and the Ship That Sank Twice* narrates the backstory of Tommy Taylor, presenting the creation of Tommy both as a cultural commodity within the fiction and as a fictional character, as the boy-wizard Tommy Taylor. The story arc opens with Wilson Taylor searching for the proper style and format for the story he is planning, a story that he is intending to use as a weapon against the Cabal and as a tool to rewrite the history of humankind. Here, Wilson Taylor ponders the nature of the fantastic and the function of genre, contemplating the phantasmagoric power of popular culture and its commodities. The fetishistic force of the generic and archetypical is precisely what he sets out to capture, blatantly emulating, even plagiarizing, the successful works of the time. Thus the first three pages of the comic book are laid out as pastiches of well-known fantasy formulas, blending the works of Nesbit, Lewis and Tolkien with the American tradition of superhero comics, visually quoting both the pseudoscientific backstory of Superman and the traditionally based mythopoiesis of Captain Marvel (Figure 10).

Wilson Taylor’s use of pastiche and formula is deliberate, forming a crucial part of the plan to turn Tommy Taylor into a material-cultural assemblage. Tolkien’s influence on the formulas of the fantastic is described as an overwhelming cultural force, reconfiguring the history of the fantastic and setting the form of the fantasy genre for following writers: “The Lord of the Rings became a blueprint for an entire genre: the quest, the dark lord, the enchanted artifact. Once Tolkien invaded the popular consciousness, those things became black holes – exerting such massive gravity fields

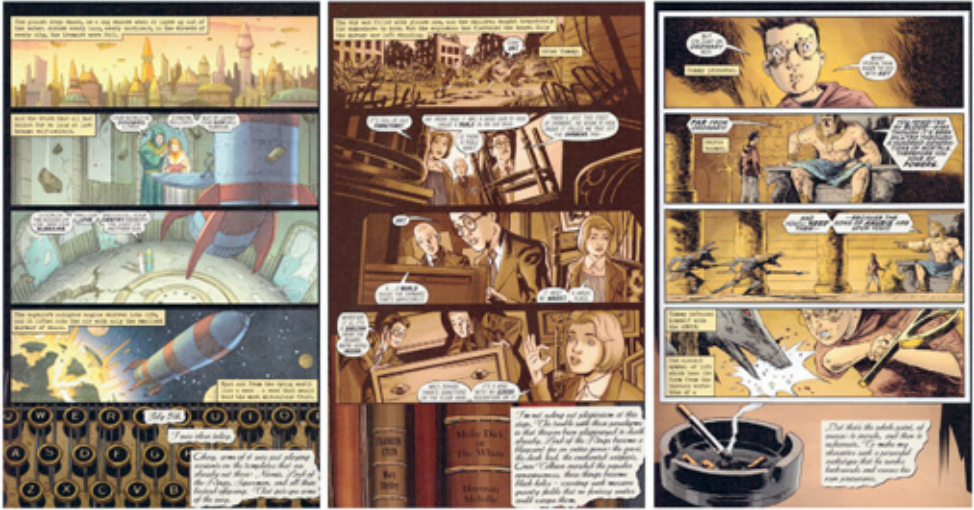


Figure 10: Mike Carey & Peter Gross, *Tommy Taylor and the Ship That Sank Twice* (DC Vertigo, 2014)

that no fantasy writer could escape them.”<sup>142</sup> Wilson Taylor’s *Tommy Taylor* books signal belonging to a genre while at the same time inventing and reconfiguring this genre, rewriting its history, and thereby forefronting the act of rewriting itself. Within the fictional world of the comic, this rewriting extends to consensus reality. The story reconfigures reality and genre alike. Just as the singularity of the story emerges within a new configuration of universals, enforcing a history that has always been retroactively valid, a new historical continuum is generated, effectively unwriting histories. The subjectivity produced here is at once singular and at the same time participating in – or being subjugated to, depending on the ethos employed – a network of distributed agencies. This is the outcome of the paradoxical tension between the general and the singular. Here genre functions as an ecosystem, where structural coupling operates by the operationally ajar closure of sympoiesis. To a certain degree, this is a violent and disturbing experience, always threatening the continuity of a subject, as well as that of the environment. Wilson Taylor comments, apropos the violence of his exercises in pastiche and appropriation: “But that’s the whole point, of course: to invade, and then to redecorate. To make my character such a powerful archetype that he works backwards and erases his own precursors.”<sup>143</sup> The following section will discuss how some of the most influential definitions of fantastic proposed after Todorov relate to the notion of participatory genres as ontogenetic ecosystems.

<sup>142</sup> Mike Carey, Peter Gross, *Tommy Taylor and the Ship That Sank Twice* (New York: DC Comics, 2013), pages not numbered.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, np

## Todorov and structuralism

Todorov defines the fantastic as a liminal space situated between two adjacent genres, the marvelous and the uncanny. The concept of the fantastic is therefore to be understood as in relation to the concepts of the real and the imaginary. While the main part of the definition has already been discussed, one of its earliest formulations – Todorov offers a number of precisions throughout his book – reads as follows:

In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. Either the devil is an illusion, an imaginary being; or else he really exists precisely like other living beings – with this reservation, that we encounter him infrequently.

The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.<sup>144</sup>

A paradigmatic text for the fantastic, in Todorov's definition, is Henry James' novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). James' book narrates, through a complex folding of narrators, what, on the one hand, could be understood as a fairly conventional ghost story, and on the other hand, as a realistic depiction of a person suffering from psychotic delusions. In the first case, if *The Turn of the Screw* narrates the actual existence of ghosts, it belongs to a class of literature that accepts the supernatural, that is, the marvelous. In the second case, if the supernatural is revealed as a set of natural coincidences, the story belongs to a class of texts merely playing with the ineffable as a plot device, that is, the uncanny. The point here is that the truly fantastic text – of which James' story is one of few examples, in Todorov's opinion – does not opt finally for one of the two but is forever suspended in this middle-ground, in between two systems of meaning.

Although Todorov notes that a work of literature may contain several genres, he nevertheless seems to postulate the existence of autonomous genres. This is how he for instance understands the genres of the uncanny and the marvelous. On the contrary, Todorov states that the fantastic for the most part and in most works (not counting

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<sup>144</sup> Todorov, 1975, p 25

a limited number of ideal cases, of which *Turn of the Screw* and Gérard de Nerval's *Aurélie* (1855) are two instances) is produced only during a limited part of the reading. Accordingly the fantastic is tied to the activity of reading, as an ongoing process. The fantastic is an aesthetics of the present tense, says Todorov, and concludes that after having finished reading – in most cases, that is, not counting the few ideal instances of the fantastic – “what we call the fantastic has not existed.”<sup>145</sup> To a certain degree, Todorov's analysis here seems to come into conflict with its own terms. The explicit purpose of his structural approach to the fantastic is to “transcend the old dichotomy of form and content, in order to consider the work as a totality and a dynamic unity.”<sup>146</sup> To this extent, Todorov does not focus on interpretation of individual works but rather seeks to offer a way to describe the mechanisms that lie behind the production of meaning. Here, Todorov's definition offers an analysis of structures as dynamic unities of emergent experience; it presents the fantastic as an event, as a concept in process. However, it is also clear that a number of concepts operative in his analysis function according to a structuralist schema, in which systems function as holistic totalities, and where emergent properties – such as the ambiguities of the fantastic – are ultimately contained within a pre-existing order. Thus, while the analysis of the fantastic as an emergent event in a sense offers a means to “transcend the old dichotomy of form and content” – and this is what makes Todorov's definition useful as a description of ontogenesis – it is at the same time limited to a notion of totality and unity in which this dichotomy still operates.

It is this structuralist concept of literature, and of meaning and subjectivity, that prevents Todorov from framing the fantastic as embodied, ambiguous perception rather than as represented – structurally and thematically – ambiguous perception. Following Derrida's discussion of participatory genres, it could then be argued that the ambiguities of the fantastic delineated by Todorov on the one hand describes how genres, and texts, participate in other texts and genres. On the other hand, Todorov seems to presuppose that genres ultimately belong to a holistically organized structure. However, by setting aside this structuralist definition of literature, it could be argued that Todorov's definition of the fantastic – stressing experience and perception as process and emergence – already is ecological.

Discussing the fantastic, Todorov makes a distinction between historical and theoretical genres: “the first would result from an observation of literary reality; the second from a deduction of a theoretical order”.<sup>147</sup> On the one hand, a discussion of the fantastic takes for its base a historical set of texts which are set into relation by

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., p 42

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p 94

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p 13-14

historical circumstances; on the other hand, a structure is used to deduce a set of possible texts. Using Todorov's definition of the fantastic as an ecological concept, rather than as a structuralist one, it is clear that this distinction between historical genres and theoretical genres can be accommodated by the operationally ajar closure of sympoiesis. Genres organize their environment, and in this sense function as a theoretical deduction, while at the same time being organized by the environments to which they are coupled. Todorov's definition can then be used to describe the uncertainty that any system – such as a genre – experiences when it is coupled to a new system and is subsequently confronted with an unknown organization of the environment. In conclusion, Todorov's definition can be used to describe how genres participate in generating worlds: “the fantastic has what at first glance appears to be a tautological function: it permits the description of a fantastic universe, one that has no reality outside language; the description and what is described are not of a different nature.”<sup>148</sup> It is from this position that the analysis of the fantastic can inform the ontogenesis of media sketched in the previous section.

### **Kathryn Hume: departure from consensus reality**

In her book *Fantasy and Mimesis* (1984) Kathryn Hume traces the entangled relation of the fantastic and mimetic mode in Western literature. By fantasy – and here Hume's use of “fantasy” is on a par with Todorov's fantastic, that is, she is not discussing the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century genre or marketing category of fantasy but a much more general mode of representation working on the same level as mimesis – Hume means “the deliberate departure from the limits of what is usually accepted as real and normal.”<sup>149</sup> “Fantasy”, says Hume, “is any departure from consensus reality, an impulse native to literature and manifested in innumerable variations, from monster to metaphor.”<sup>150</sup> This might at first seem to be an overly simplistic definition, and Hume acknowledges the risk of it encompassing all creative works in Western cultural history. However, it points to one central aspect of the fantastic, namely its self-reflexive character, its insistence on calling into question the frameworks within which it is articulated. It is not merely the case that narratives of the fantastic contain supernatural elements, it is rather the manner in which these are presented that is of importance to Hume, and more precisely that this presentation brings to the fore the artifice of representation. Literature is “the product of two impulses”, says Hume, “*mimesis*, felt as the desire to describe events, people, situations, and objects with such verisimilitude that others can share your experience;

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<sup>148</sup> Todorov, 1975., 92

<sup>149</sup> Hume, 2012, p xii

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, p 21



and *fantasy*, the desire to change givens and alter reality – out of boredom, play, vision, longing for something lacking, or need for metaphoric images that will bypass the audience’s verbal defenses.”<sup>151</sup> To this extent, the fantastic – in its proper form, and Hume clearly has a normative notion of what kinds of literature are preferred, namely canonized works of modernist and postmodernist literature – also has a defamiliarizing function.

The departure from consensus reality of the fantastic can serve four basic functions, says Hume: illusion – where the departure is mere escape; vision and revision – where the unreal in different ways offers new perspectives on reality; and lastly, disillusion – where the unknowable character of reality is thematized through the fantastic.<sup>152</sup> While these categories, outlining a cultural hierarchy, focus on the manner in which narratives of the fantastic affect the reader’s notion of and relation to reality, this is nevertheless an affect that first and foremost takes the form of interpretation. Although Hume seeks to discuss how fantastic literature establishes – primarily by overdetermination – a sense of relation and participation, participation is nevertheless ultimately grounded in what a literary work means, and not what it does, to the reader and other objects with which it is in relation.<sup>153</sup>

Hume’s insistence on the fantastic as a break with consensus reality takes account of historical malleability, allowing for a dynamic notion of what at a given time and place counts for the supernatural. It is, however, not only the presence of the supernatural that qualifies a narrative as fantastic. The supernatural must also be articulated in relation to a represented notion of consensus reality; and furthermore, a tension between the fantastic and the mimetic needs to be represented. If this tension is lacking, if the supernatural is presented as a fictional truth, without relation to a notion of a consensus reality – whether mythological or scientific – the result is but “crippled myth”<sup>154</sup>, without transcendent elements, a literature of escape that “rarely challenges us to think” and merely produces “physical sensations and unfocused feelings.”<sup>155</sup> The fantastic in Hume’s understanding here seems to play down the affective and participatory aspects of the fantastic in favor of its represented meaning content. This is both an ethical and an aesthetic problem: “escape literature offers blind, passive enjoyment and demands no obligation toward the source of the pleasurable simulation. We disengage from the real world in order to engage with these comforting illusions.”<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p 20

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p 55

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p 194

<sup>154</sup> Hume, 2012, p 66

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., p 81

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p 81

## Brian Attebery: fantasy as mode, genre and formula

Brian Attebery agrees with Kathryn Hume in viewing the fantastic and the mimetic as the two basic modes of narrative: “As Kathryn Hume points out, fantasy and mimesis are the fundamental operations of the narrative imagination.”<sup>157</sup> He stresses that the fantastic and the mimetic are coexistent in every kind of narrative. They might be contrasting modes, but not opposites. However, when it comes to dealing with the popular genres of the fantastic – that is, fantasy, science fiction, horror and all their hybrid and subgenres – Attebery points out that neither Hume’s nor Todorov’s approach serves particularly well. Works of popular fantasy do not present their storyworlds as epistemological enigmas. The popular genre of fantasy simply does not function as Todorov describes the fantastic. But it is not only Todorov’s definition of the genre of the fantastic that is problematic; it is the very notion of genre as structuring principle that seems to be at odds with how the fantastic as well as the popular genre of fantasy functions.

In an effort to clarify the different uses of ‘fantasy’ and ‘the fantastic’, Attebery uses a tripartite division: fantasy as mode, formula and genre. Fantasy as a mode refers to a particular manner in which to tell a story, in which representation produces appearance rather than likeness, corresponding to the concept of the fantastic delineated by Todorov. Fantasy as a formula, on the other hand, is a recent phenomenon designating “a rigid pattern of setting, character, and plot comparable to the formulas for the detective novel, the Western and the women’s romance.”<sup>158</sup> Fantasy as a formula is largely a commercial category, comprising all those books, films, comics and other products that have, for different marketing reasons, been labeled fantasy since the 1970s, approximately. Attebery notes that the modal approach to the fantastic is vast in its scope, bringing together many different historical works and ultimately posing the question of the limits of language. The formula approach to fantasy, on the other hand, is narrow, both in its historical scope, placing the birth of fantasy at the emergence of the market category of fantasy after the commercial success of Tolkien in the 1960s, and in its criteria. Instead, Attebery suggest that fantasy as a genre is situated in between these two extremes, where the formula restricts while at the same time being contested by the mode. “The history of the fantasy genre may be viewed as the story of the imposition of one particular set of restrictions on the mode of the fantastic”<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Attebery, 1992, p 3

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p 9

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p 10



## **Farah Mendlesohn: rhetorics of fantasy**

Arguably the most influential study of the popular genres of the fantastic of recent years is Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008). Mendlesohn's study centers on the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, predominately Anglo-American genre of fantasy. The main objective of her study is to elaborate a taxonomy of the rhetorical strategies with which the fantastic is presented in literary narratives. The discussion is thus mainly focused on an analysis of literary works in isolation, as rhetorical and narrative structures. If at the outset Mendlesohn situates the fantastic as a participatory literary form, stating: "I believe that the fantastic is an area of literature that is heavily dependent on the dialectic between author and reader for the construction of a sense of wonder, that it is a fiction of consensual construction of belief",<sup>160</sup> and stressing the rhetoric as an affective mode, her discussion never questions the basic integrity and identity of the categories of modernist aesthetics.

Mendlesohn provides a working taxonomy of fantasy, sketching four different rhetorical strategies for introducing the supernatural world into the narrative. This introduction is prefigured as a dialectic between a represented consensus reality and the fantastic. The four categories of fantasy in Mendlesohn's taxonomy are: portal-quest fantasy, that is fantasy where the narrative focalization moves from a known reality into the supernatural (as in *Alice in Wonderland*, C. S. Lewis' *Narnia* books or Frank Baum's *Oz* series); immersive fantasy, where the narrative focalization belongs to a supernatural and alien world and does not, ideally, participate in the consensus reality of the reader; intrusion fantasy, where the realm of the supernatural breaks through into mundane reality (as in most urban fantasy or supernatural horror); and liminal fantasy, which focuses on an epistemological uncertainty akin to that presented in Todorov's analysis, where the overlapping of generic systems generates a liminal state.

Mendlesohn states that these four categories of fantasy are not to be taken as descriptions of individual works of literature but rather as possible strategies employed by any work of literary fantasy. Most literary works employ more than one strategy.

## **Nancy Traill: fictional worlds theory**

Following Todorov and Hume, Nancy Traill argues that it is not enough that an element of the supernatural is present for a narrative to be considered fantastic. Using fictional worlds theory, Traill argues that works of the fantastic establish a fictional world where a natural – or physically possible – and a supernatural – or physically im-

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<sup>160</sup> Mendlesohn, 2008, p xiii

possible – domain are contrasted. If a narrative is to be considered fantastic, the mere presence of a supernatural element is not enough; the fictional world must also thematize the relation between these two domains, and the dialectic between the natural and the supernatural must be represented. This can come about in five different ways, corresponding to five “modes” of the fantastic: disjunctive, where the natural and the supernatural are separated domains; ambiguous, where the separation is permeable; fantasy, where the supernatural is accepted; supernatural naturalized, where the supernatural, as in Todorov’s category the uncanny, gets a rational explanation; and the paranormal, where the supernatural and the natural are no longer in opposition.<sup>161</sup>

Traill’s approach seems to imply a convergence with a neocybernetic emphasis on the ontogenesis of perception, were it not for the insistence of the fictional worlds theory on a hermeneutical model, where participation in fictional worlds is ultimately prefigured as interpretation. Traill states that the fantastic is “a peculiarly plastic artistic category”<sup>162</sup> which she conceives of as a “*universal aesthetic category*” that “may take any of a number of artistic form”, and that “cuts across the genres. It may be a play, short story, novel, ballad; we may find it in the form of a painting or a statue, or perhaps a symphony or an opera.”<sup>163</sup> While professing such a diffuse field of possible material, Traill’s investigation is nevertheless limited to traditional 19<sup>th</sup>-century works of narrative fiction (she discusses the paranormal in Dickens, Turgenev and Maupassant), and the analysis is as much as Hume’s grounded in a modernist aesthetics, not merely stressing the holism of the literary work but also ignoring non-canonical literary history.

## **Rosemary Jackson: art as subversion**

A strong vein in the critical discourse on the fantastic, largely influenced by Marxist criticism, focuses on the disruptive and subversive aspects of the fantastic. Elaborating on Todorov’s definition of the fantastic, and particularly on the estrangement of hermeneutic ambiguity, Rosemary Jackson’s influential study *Fantasy: the literature of subversion* (1981) explicitly centers on what she perceives as the radical politics of the fantastic as a literary mode. The fantastic as a mode (like Hume, Jackson uses “fantasy” and “the fantastic” synonymously) opposes consensus reality, argues Jackson; accordingly, it must also disturb and dislocate those structures – protocols and discourses – that regulate the real in any given historical context.<sup>164</sup> “Presenting that which cannot be, but *is*, fantasy exposes a culture’s definitions of that which can be: it

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<sup>161</sup> Nancy Traill, *Possible Worlds of the Fantastic: The Rise of the Paranormal in Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), p 11ff

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p 135

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p 7

<sup>164</sup> Jackson, 1981, p 14

traces the limits of its epistemological and ontological frame.”<sup>165</sup> The subversive character of the fantastic, according to Jackson, lies in its ability to manifest the unnamable, to make present that which lies beyond the dominant structures of meaning. For this reason, the fantastic turns towards the means of representation themselves, estranging and defamiliarizing literary language. Jackson argues that presenting the unnamable requires a dislocation of sensation, a shift in perception (Jackson primarily perceives of perception as vision) away from “units, objects, and fixities, to the intervals between them, attempting to see as things the spaces between things.”<sup>166</sup> Just like Todorov, Jackson conceives of the fantastic as a mode that opposes allegory and metaphor. However, rather than seeing the epistemological uncertainty of generic hesitation as constituting the fantastic, Jackson conceives of the fantastic as emerging at that moment when metaphorical constructs are taken literally.<sup>167</sup> The fantastic narrative does not present an alternate world, in a symbolic relation to consensus reality, so much as it presents the alterity of the real world, the constituting otherness of the real. Jackson’s theory of the fantastic is heavily invested in the theories of Julia Kristeva, and particularly Kristeva’s notion of the *chora*.<sup>168</sup> The unnamable at the heart of the fantastic here represents the culturally repressed drives of an unconscious, and as such it cannot be codified. The moment the secondary world of the fantastic becomes a culturally sanctioned system of meaning-production, it ceases to be subversive and instead serves a consolatory function. Jackson stresses ludic aspects of the fantastic, but it is clear that participation in the literary work (or any work of art) is a question of interpretation. While professing an aesthetic ideal that promotes the non-hermeneutical – the fantastic is a literature of desire, according to Jackson – Jackson cannot conceive of literary practice as anything other than hermeneutical, treating the literary work as a coherent whole. Although the study offers a forceful critique of the categories of modernism from a psychoanalytical perspective, Jackson’s idealization of subversion as “resisting closure, opening structures which characterize experience in the name of a ‘human reality’” betrays a strong bias towards a literary (modernist and postmodernist) avant-garde.

### **José Monleón: art as false consciousness**

Approaching the politics and ethics of the fantastic from a Marxist position, but coming from a radically different angle than Jackson’s, enforcing a Lukácsian notion of social realist aesthetics, José Monleón has argued that the literary fantastic has

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p 23

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., p 48

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., p 41

<sup>168</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p 14

in fact *not* served a predominately subversive function in modern literary history; on the contrary, it has often supported dominant, capitalist ideology: “the fantastic played exactly the opposite role: that is, the defense of the status quo and the preservation of economic order. If anything, it served precisely to help modify hegemonic discourse in order to justify the survival of bourgeois society, a fact that also explains why the fantastic appeared only after the bourgeoisie had consolidated its power.”<sup>169</sup> Monleón argues, following Todorov, that the fantastic as a literary mode, enacting epistemological uncertainty, stages a conflict between reason and unreason. As such, the fantastic needs a rationalistic framework – and not merely a moralistic or mythological one – by which to delineate the supernatural: “Not until nature became objectified, and not until the supernatural was equated with the unnatural, could fantastic literature emerge.”<sup>170</sup> Monleón cites Goya’s *Capricho 43* (Figure 2) as emblematic of this conflict, but rather than prefiguring reason and unreason as antinomies, he argues that the ambiguities of Goya’s plate – as exemplified by the tension in the Spanish word “sueño”, between sleep and dream – indicates instead a possible continuation between the two concepts, where the emergence of monsters are the product of reason. Still, Monleón seems to argue that the main function of the fantastic – within modernity that is – is to police unreason: “By giving reason a kind of exposure, a displacement took place that allowed dominant society to control or tame the image of unreason, to tailor a moralistic dress around its presence. Yet this very act implied acknowledging its existence. It is in this act and in this context, both as an expression of the problem and as a means of interfering in it, that the fantastic was born as an artistic discourse that would measure and define the cultural and political boundaries between reason and unreason.”<sup>171</sup> While Monleón ultimately considers the fantastic to be an expression of an “aesthetic of irrationalism” supporting and defending the “reactionary idealism”<sup>172</sup> of a bourgeois epistemology in crisis, this critique is clearly based on a liberal humanist notion of subjectivity and agency, where art and literature are ideal forms. Monleón’s Marxist reading of the history of the fantastic clearly focuses on interpretation as the only means of participation, and from this perspective his conclusions have some weight, pointing out that if the fantastic is treated as an hermeneutical and modernist phenomenon, within a liberal humanist notion of culture, such might well be its cultural function. However, in his discussion of Goya’s etchings Monleón touches upon – though he does not elaborate – a material aspect of literature and art that entails, as was argued in the introduction, a different approach to participation, where form and content, reason and unreason,

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<sup>169</sup> Monleón, 1990, p 14

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, p 8

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p 48

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p 138

are not necessarily in opposition: “The figures do not present clear contours; there are no orderly transitions between the different planes; the frontier between the images of reality and those of fantasy are blurred.”<sup>173</sup>

### **The ethico-aesthetic function of the fantastic as hermeneutical concept**

Thus the literature of the fantastic is – in Hume, Traill, Jackson and Monleón, as well as in Todorov – understood only in relation to a scientifically grounded, rationalistic worldview. These critics frame the fantastic as a means to question – by using the supernatural – the limits of consensus reality. This is the ethico-aesthetic function of the fantastic as a hermeneutical concept, in Jackson’s version serving to expunge the ideological superstructure of a particular cultural context, or, following Hume, delineating the future of a critical utopianism. Hence the fantastic as a literary mode does not emerge until early modern times, when the supernatural gradually becomes tied to a pre-modern – and soon to be unenlightened and superstitious – worldview. This is not an altogether erroneous genealogy, although, as Bakhtin’s work on the carnevalesque evinces, if nothing else, it is not the only relevant history of the fantastic.<sup>174</sup> While an emerging modern literary canon gradually coalesces around a literature in which the aesthetics of the fantastic consists of a dialectics between a natural and a supernatural domain, and where the accepted supernatural is relegated to the myths and legends of the past, there nevertheless clearly exist literatures unaccounted for by such a canon. Popular and mass-produced literatures and prints, like the “bestsellers” of pre-revolutionary France theorized and investigated by Robert Darnton, form such a literature, as do the serialized mysteries and Gothic romances of the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century, where the presence of the supernatural – even the accepted supernatural – is particularly salient.<sup>175</sup>

Aside from the hermeneutical bias dominating the critical discourse on the aesthetics of the fantastic from Todorov and onwards, most – if not all – literary theories on the fantastic also seem to deal with a limited selection of material, almost exclusively corresponding to a small set of canonized literary works. While these critics clearly acknowledge different forms of representation as relevant to the aesthetics of the fantastic – arguing as Traill does that the fantastic cuts across genres and forms – it is nevertheless almost exclusively the printed narrative, the novel or

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., p 49

<sup>174</sup> Bakhtin discusses the fantastic, especially as exemplified by the genre of Menippean satire, as part of a set of carnivalized genres that have been resurfacing throughout Western literary history in opposition to classicist tendencies. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999 (1984)), p 112-116, p 137-139

<sup>175</sup> Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-sellers of Pre-revolutionary France* (London: Fontana, 1997)

short story, that is under discussion. And furthermore, as already noted, theories of the literary fantastic rarely – if ever – deal with mass-produced or so-called popular narratives. Conversely, the theoretical discourse on the popular fantastic – and here it is primarily the discourse on the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century genre of fantasy that is of interest – has seldom treated fantasy in relation to the literary fantastic. And when theoretical attention has been paid to the popular genres of the fantastic, it has predominately been occupied by a literary material, that is, fantasy in the form of novels and short stories, treated as hermeneutical wholes.

### **Mark Bould: the hailing of the fantastic**

Mark Bould, however, suggests a critique of the modernist theories of the fantastic, partly from a Marxist perspective, but also, as opposed to Monleón and Jackson, at the same time questioning liberal humanism. The main problem with current theories of the fantastic, says Bould, is the notion of subjectivity on which most of them are based. The theories of the fantastic presented from Todorov and onward – Bould discusses Todorov and Jackson at some length – fail to address fantastic writings other than canonical ones, or ones that correspond to a canonical, modernist aesthetics of idealist hermeneutics. The primary flaw of modernist theories of the fantastic, argues Bould, is that they overlook the commodity character of the fantastic as a (mass) cultural object. Bould argues that the feedback loops innate to the fantastic – the feedback loops characterized here as ecological sympoiesis – are closely tied to its commodity function in capitalist society. This is why the “concern with world-building, and with the paranoid construction of textual ontologies, is consistently foregrounded in fantasy and the fantastic genres.”<sup>176</sup> What the mass produced objects of the fantastic evince, is that when it comes to world-building – when functioning as ontogenetic ecosystems – there is no essential difference between art and commodity. In Bould’s Marxist reading of the fantastic, this is where the genres of the fantastic offer a critique of the autonomous subjectivity of liberal modernity. Using Althusser’s notion of discursive subjectivity as interpellation, Bould argues that cultural experience is always-already a question of being submitted to a system of meaning, subjected to an order of things. However, the always-already of interpellation does not imply that subjects are passively manipulated by dominant discourse, instead Althusser’s theory must be taken in a radical way:

If, like Althusser, we introduce for the purposes of illustration a temporal dimension into his model, and add to that the rather more complex notions of causation that have

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<sup>176</sup> Mark Bould, “The Dreadful Credibility of Absurd Things”, in *Historical Materialism*, volume 10:4, (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2002), p 81

emerged in complexity and chaos science, we can arrive at a model of the subject who is discrepant and contradictory but nonetheless determined by ideological interpellations. Each hailing positions the individual as a subject, but each hailing is in tension with every other hailing's attempt to position the individual as a subject. The subject, then, is not to be considered as a singular point, a monadic intersection, through which all hailings pass, but as a cluster or cloud of positions, constantly shifting and repositioning in response to each new hailing.<sup>177</sup>

Bould's notion of complex interpellation here clearly corresponds to the idea of distributed agency and distributed subjectivity. Thus this Marxist reformulation of a theory for the fantastic avoids both the elevation of the fantastic as an innately subversive mode, and the subsequent devaluation of all non-subversive works of the fantastic as compensatory fantasies, as well as offering a means for assessing the dynamic structures of power involved in the ontogenesis of media. Bould's reformulation of the ethico-aesthetics of the fantastic also has the benefit of dealing – not merely negatively, as a lack of certain aesthetic values – with the mass-produced and popular genres of the fantastic.

### **The postmodern fantastic: Lucy Armitt and Brian McHale**

It has already been noted that Todorov's definition of the fantastic is based on the romantic genre of the fantastic tale, and that the hermeneutical doubt and epistemological uncertainty on which his definition hinges corresponds to the hermeneutical ideals of the literary work as an autonomous and coherent whole. Thus the modernist notion of literature can accommodate the fantastic as long as it confines – as in Todorov's treatise – its perceptual ambiguities to the realm of representation and to the perceptual apparatus of the implied reader. The modernist fantastic is in this sense a liberal humanist genre, sketching the existence of the supernatural either as faulty rationality or as faulty perception, but keeping the humanist subject intact and distanced. The rise of realism as the literary norm in the mid 19<sup>th</sup>-century can be understood as an accommodation of the fantastic as a hermeneutical ambiguity overcome by modern subjectivity. The momentary estrangement of the supernatural is contained, if not by a rational explanation or by modern historiography relegating the supernatural to the realm of the un-modern or the superstitious, then by the hermeneutical aesthetics of modernism, as Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* is an eminent example of.

Jean-Francois Lyotard notes that the unattainable sublime is within modernity surrounded by nostalgia and lies – spatially and temporally – beyond the structures

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., pp 76-77



of narrative, while postmodern art and literature is characterized by presenting the unrepresentable within representation. Modern art puts forward the unrepresentable as content, says Lyotard, while the form of the presentation remains recognizable and consistent, therefore continuing to offer solace and affirmation to the modern and distanced subject. This postmodernist notion of art and literature seems to speak to the liminality of the fantastic.

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.<sup>178</sup>

Postmodernist aesthetics famously shifts the emphasis, argues Brian McHale, from epistemology to ontology. In the absence of a structuring metanarrative delineating a coherent reality – whether Nature, History or Religion – representation cannot be strictly mimetic but will also involve a moment of construction of that reality which is represented. By laying bare the structures of representation, a postmodernist literary work does not merely represent a world; it also makes clear how it becomes that world, argues McHale. McHale draws support for his argument from possible-worlds theories and the ontological theories of Roman Ingarden. But where Ingarden seeks to contain the heteronomous character of literature – its ability to be both autonomous and dependent upon a reader for its emergence – on the level of interpretation, McHale emphasizes the importance of the medium of representation.<sup>179</sup> Fantastic fiction, McHale notes, has close affinities to postmodernist fiction; in fact, the hesitation of Todorov’s definition of the fantastic is pushed beyond epistemology in postmodernist fiction, becoming a dialogue between worlds. This is how the fantastic, argues McHale, can continue within the literary field in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Todorov’s definition fails to account for a fantastic literature that does not present the fantastic as a question concerning the nature of representation. McHale instead proposes to figure the fantastic as staging hesitation as ontological, as a confrontation, on the part of the reader, face-to-face “between the possible (the ‘real’)

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<sup>178</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p 81

<sup>179</sup> “But Ingarden was wrong; it is precisely by foregrounding the skeleton of layers – as well as the double-decker structure of reference described by Hrushovski, the transworld identity described by Eco and so on – that postmodernist fiction achieves its aesthetic effects and sustains interest, in the process modeling the complex ontological landscape of our experience.” Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004(1987)), p 39



and the impossible, the normal and the paranormal.”<sup>180</sup> This operation circumvents the ad hoc function of the implied reader insisted on by Todorov: “The fantastic”, says McHale, “by this analysis, can still be seen as a zone of hesitation, a frontier – not, however, a frontier between the uncanny and the marvelous, but between this world and the world next door”.<sup>181</sup> Postmodernist fantastic fiction goes even one step further, says McHale, and need not be formally considered fantastic at all but can stage an ontological hesitation within the structure of the narration, without representing a supernatural or ostensibly unreal intrusion: “Hesitation has been displaced from the frontier between this world and the ‘world next door,’ to the confrontation between different ontological levels in the structure of texts.”<sup>182</sup> This is how, as will be discussed in some detail in the following section, the neo-fantastic narratological studies undertaken by Jaime Alazraki and to some degree Christine Brooke-Rose prefigure the narrative function of the fantastic, as staging several ontological levels within one signifying paradigm. McHale’s postmodernist analysis – as well as neo-fantastic narratology – points out relevant weaknesses in Todorov’s definition, indicating a non-epistemological approach to the fantastic.

Arguing that the aesthetics of the fantastic primarily centers on play, space and embodiment, Lucy Armitt situates the fantastic in postmodernist theory, where particularly Donna Haraway’s cyborg theory become productive. Armitt discusses the fantastic as a disruptive and transgressive mode, crossing borders and challenging boundaries. To this extent, structuralist and formalist notions of genre do not apply. The narratives of the fantastic are effective aesthetically not by conforming to generic models, but by moving – as Todorov’s definition implies – between generic structures:

In essence, then, where genre definitions tend to seal up texts, the fantastic opens them up to an ambivalence that must conspire against the formulaic, despite the fact that Todorov insists on retaining the word ‘genre’ for what is more usefully seen as an impulse or an interrogative drive. This endlessly open and thus non-containable text must therefore pose a dangerous threat to established notions of fixity and conformity, a characteristic that obviously makes the fantastic a particularly appealing form for the exploration of socio-political marginality and ex-centrity<sup>183</sup>.

The open character of the fantastic affects how its narratives function in relation to origins and originality, says Armitt, stressing co-production and replacing the

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., p 75

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., p 75

<sup>182</sup> *ibid.*, p 83

<sup>183</sup> Lucy Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic* (London: Arnolf, 1996), p 33

author figure with a distributed authorial function. The subjectivity of the fantastic is thus in transition, and its narratives operate as so many versions linked to an absent original. Armitt cites the fairy-tale, following Propp's morphology, as emblematic of this kind of relation, which clearly takes the form of a flat ontology (though Armitt does not explicitly conceptualize it as such): "perhaps it is this lack of any one originary version of a particular fairy story that makes this sub-genre not only intrinsically intertextual, but also interactive with so many other cultural forms."<sup>184</sup> The play of the fantastic here seems to indicate, for the most part at least, a play with – and against – cultural binaries. As such, it is a concept that corresponds to Barthes' notion of textual play. However, Armitt stresses how textual play indicates a situated experience, spatial and embodied, and that while this could be a liberating and subversive form of "free-play", opening up new vistas of perception – the secondary worlds of the fantastic, for example – it also entails the fear of transmutation and corporeal metamorphosis. Armitt thus argues that the carnivalesque and grotesque are not unequivocally positive categories, as Bakhtin seems to think, inasmuch as they also threaten the integrity of bodies, individual and political alike.

Armitt's theory of the fantastic makes a number of salient points that are relevant to a media-ecological approach. The postmodernist critique of origins and authority – primarily from the perspective of Haraway's cyborg theory and Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum – is clearly operative, laying the ground for participation and co-production, as well as the fluid notion of textual and corporeal integrity and identity. And by coupling Haraway's cyborg theory to Bakhtin's corporeal theory of the carnivalesque and the grotesque, Armitt indicates how embodiment becomes a category with which the fantastic converges and where much theoretical insight can be gained. These merits notwithstanding, Armitt's theory also proves, precisely by its very merits, that a more radical approach is needed, where the postmodernist critique of the critical categories of enlightened humanism is taken to its conclusion. Arguing from a constructivist point of view, where language is prefigured as the ultimate mode to construct worldviews, and where generic structures by analogy correspond to the protocols of dominant discourse, textual play in Armitt's postmodernist version naturally becomes a powerful tool for investigating and criticizing cultural concepts, as long as these concepts correspond to a linguistic model. However, the linguistic model, if ultimately grounded in hermeneutic idealism, as it is in Armitt's theory, is insufficient when it comes to the embodied participation of play. Bodies here, as in McHale's theory, are predominantly – if not ultimately – textual bodies.

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., p 21

### 3. Participatory texts

Grounding narrative theory in neocybernetics, Bruce Clarke argues that although a narrative purports to deliver a given meaning-making content, this delivery is always situated in a network of relations impacting on its meaning: “the material mediums for transmitting narrative texts are themselves composed of semiotic elements bound into significant structures.”<sup>185</sup> A narrative functions as a sign trace, says Clarke, self-presenting as the trace of a sign in need of an observer. In this sense, a narrative is not a strictly autopoietic system. Instead, any narrative is always enmeshed in a situation where other systems – living or nonliving – observe its process of meaning-making. Thus the meaning-making of narrative is tied to a network of intersecting systems rather than coming forth as a transmission of textual content; “[t]here is an ecology of systems to be brought to bear in any semiotic instance”<sup>186</sup>, says Clarke, arguing that narratives produce meaning by the movement – temporal and spatial – between these different systems, stressing the “cognitive kinetics” of any meaning-making situation, a process he calls *semioleipsis*. The trace of the sign is both what leaps towards and seizes the reader in a narrative, while at the same time effectuating a semiosis that moves between and relates, in an event of emergence, different semiotic systems.<sup>187</sup> Interestingly, while *semioleipsis* characterizes the meaning-making properties of narrative in general, Clarke seems to argue, grounding this meaning-making in an ecology of systems, that it is nevertheless particularly salient in narratives of the supernatural and the fantastic: “When a narrative is ostensibly ‘mythical,’ or ‘fantastic,’ or ‘magical,’ for instance, by presenting characters that are themselves paranormal – angelic or ‘psychic’ – that narrative is, in fact, hiding in plain sight a piece of its own fictive machinery.”<sup>188</sup> The following section will discuss how fantastic texts make this machinery part of an embodied experience, in which texts and readers alike participate.

#### Fantastic narrative

In *Narrative Discourse*, Gérard Genette’s comments that the rhetorical figure of author’s metalepsis, a figure Genette transfers to the narratological figure *narrative metalepsis*, “produces an effect of strangeness that is either comical (when, as in

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<sup>185</sup> Clarke, 2014, p 20

<sup>186</sup> Clarke, 2014, p 21

<sup>187</sup> “From another important and well-discussed angle, this eventfulness is the *différance* of the trace, its differential structure of multiple deferrals. But I want to emphasize the cognitive kinetics of the situation. *Semioleipsis* picks up this sense by suggesting not the seizure precisely, but by means of the bad pun, the *leap* of the trace. Or, more accurately the leap that we observers endow on the trace *by* seizing it, yielding the figurative reversal that it has seized us.” Clarke, 2014, p 21

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p 29

Sterne or Diderot, it is presented in a joking tone) or fantastic”<sup>189</sup>. Transgression of the system of narrative could thus produce a sense of the fantastic. Narratological studies following Genette’s comment on the fantastic have proven fruitful when expounding the function of the fantastic as a narrative device.

Christine Brooke-Rose’s study on the novels of Alain Robbe-Grillet serves to prove the point. Brooke-Rose highlights how the avant-garde aesthetics of the French *nouveau roman*, by transgressing the system of narrative, in Genette’s terminology its levels, voices, and moods, produces an impossible narration of insoluble ambiguity, forcing the reader into a state of perpetual uncertainty. Brooke-Rose convincingly shows how a particular form of self-reflective narration produces the effect of the fantastic. It is the narration itself that is fantastic in Robbe-Grillet’s novels, not what is narrated. The *nouveau roman* does not present a supernatural event; rather it produces and presents supernatural perception. Brooke-Rose argues that it is the form of a particular, experimental literature that in itself is to be understood as fantastic.

If the only feature that distinguishes the pure fantastic from the uncanny and the marvelous is ambiguity, which in turn is shared with some non-fantastic fiction, we must either emphasise [sic] (as Todorov does) that this ambiguity concerns only the supernatural (thus in effect falling back on the supernatural as basic element), or treat other non-‘fantastic’ texts as a displaced form of the fantastic, which is what I shall be doing in this book.<sup>190</sup>

Likewise, the reformulation of Todorov’s definition of the fantastic, suggested by Jaime Alazraki in his studies on Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar, in order to suit modernist and postmodernist fantasy, has proven productive. Alazraki points out how Todorov’s analysis falls short when dealing with literature that challenges the notion of an autonomous subjectivity. Franz Kafka’s texts, for example, do not present the reader with a choice of interpretations between which there could exist a hesitation. Rather, says Alazraki, Kafka’s texts take the form of a perpetual allegory, always hinting at but never conceding a single meaning. In this sense, the neo-fantastic is ontological, not epistemological; it presents the text itself as alien and other, and not as a representation of otherness.<sup>191</sup>

Both Alazraki and Brooke-Rose argue for the applicability of Todorov’s definition of the fantastic outside the historical scope of his analysis. And both stress the self-

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<sup>189</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), p 235

<sup>190</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal, studies in narrative & structure, especially of the fantastic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010 (1981)), p 65

<sup>191</sup> Jaime Alazraki, *En Busca Del Unicornio: Los Cuentos de Julio Cortázar* (Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1983), 26ff

referring gesture of narration as essential in understanding how it is possible, using Todorov's distinctions, to describe a certain kind of narrative as in itself being fantastic. The semiotic and narratological analyses of Alazraki and Brooke-Rose indicate an understanding of the medium of narrative, whereby the ambiguous perceptions of the fantastic are situated in the material and discursive practices of narrative. Though questioning liberal humanist subjectivity and sensibility, neither Alazraki nor Brooke-Rose go so far as to treat literary narrative as a material medium; they locate a postmodernist – if not non-modernist – critique on the level of representation, where narrative form is in a structural relation to narrative content. This postmodernist stance nevertheless indicates a non-modernist application of the fantastic narrative and will prove informative when approaching the aesthetic of the fantastic from a media-ecological point of view.

## Metalepsis

After the comments on narrative metalepsis made, more or less en passant, by Genette in *Narrative Discourse*, the study of metalepsis has become a vibrant field of investigation. Metalepsis, as Genette defines it, consists of a transgression between the diegetic levels of narration, provoking a sense of the fantastic. From a narratological standpoint, metalepsis generates a liminal space.

In the short story Genette uses to exemplify metalepsis, "Continuity of Parks" by Julio Cortázar, a man is about to be murdered by characters in a book he is reading. This, at least, seems to be the case. Things are, however, perhaps not so clear cut. In extreme brevity – twenty-seven sentences in two pages in its Spanish original – Cortázar tells the story of a country gentleman returning to his rural estate after a business trip into town. Here, in his home, the gentleman retires to his study, to his favorite green velvet armchair, where he picks up a book he had begun "a few days before".<sup>192</sup> This book, in turn, tells the story of a clandestine meeting between two lovers in a desolate "mountain cabin."<sup>193</sup> The lovers plot to murder the husband of the woman involved, and after returning to the husband's estate in the middle of the night, after the rendezvous, their plans unfold effortlessly. Everything is as it should be: "the dogs were not supposed to bark, they did not bark"<sup>194</sup> – until the murderous lover reaches his victim: a country gentleman retired to his study, sitting in a green velvet armchair reading a book. Here the narrative cuts short.

It is no coincidence that the paradigmatic example of fantastic metalepsis referred to by Genette involves a metafictional self-reference. A transgression of the levels of

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<sup>192</sup> Julio Cortázar, *Blow-Up and Other Stories*, trans. Paul Blackburn (New York: Collier Books, 1968), p 55

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p 55

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p 56

diegesis presupposes a presentation, within the narrative, of different diegetic levels. A layering of stories within stories needs to be represented, and this can only be done in the form of a material medium (or in the verbal representation of a material medium). In Cortázar's story, the book medium becomes this material representation of a story of a secondary order. The transgressions between levels seem to establish the sustained uncertainty and hesitation of the fantastic on a purely narratological level. However, this is not entirely clear. On closer examination, there are no grounds, on a semantic level, for a metaleptic interpretation of Cortázar's story. It is perfectly possible to interpret the ending as pure coincidence, as neither fantastic nor metaleptic. Rather, metalepsis and the fantastic here are a matter of configuration, of actively choosing to play by the rules, to become part of the metaleptic transgression.

The study of metalepsis distinguishes between two general forms of this device: rhetorical metalepsis and ontological metalepsis. Rhetorical metalepsis is played out on the level of narration, involving and affecting the functions and roles of narrator and narratee. This is the form of metalepsis common to non-fantastic literature, where a narrating voice turns directly to an audience, real or implied, and comments on the narrative. Rhetorical metalepsis has an estranging effect, but leaves the content of the narration unaffected (inasmuch as the content and form of a narration can be separated).<sup>195</sup> Ontological metalepsis, on the other hand, involves a disruption that changes the content of the story world, implying an ontological breach between two distinct worlds, which in turn necessitates a new set of natural laws. Ontological metalepsis implies characters or objects existing in several distinct worlds at the same time, making it incompatible with a realistic framework.<sup>196</sup> As a narratological figure, metalepsis, as Genette points out, establishes a moment of hesitation which, when taken to its extreme, as in the case of Cortázar's short story, performs as the liminal space characteristic of the pure fantastic of Todorov's taxonomy. Here, metalepsis brings forth the materiality of representation, its effects hinging entirely

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<sup>195</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan discusses the distinction, which is her own, in *Avatars of Story*, in Chapter 9, "Metaleptic Machines," using the computer stack as a metaphor for Genette's narratological concept of diegetic levels. "Rhetorical metalepsis opens a small window that allows a quick glance across levels, but the window closes after a few sentences, and the operation ends up reasserting the existence of boundaries. This temporal breach of illusion does not threaten the basic structure of the narrative universe. In the rhetorical brand of metalepsis, the author may speak *about* her characters, presenting the as creations of her imagination," Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 207

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, p 210

on formal qualities.<sup>197</sup> In these cases, the rhetorical metalepsis becomes ontological, establishing reader participation within a fictional space.

Ontological metalepsis works in two directions; it has both an immersive effect, and an ironic and disruptive effect. This is grounded in the way metalepsis plays with the hierarchical relation between the real and the fictional. Even if the relation between different storyworlds goes unmentioned, a struggle for hierarchy is always enacted; metalepsis puts the veracity of the narration under question. Metalepsis thereby functions as an enactment of the liminal space of the fantastic, producing a defamiliarizing effect, stalling the naturalization of narration and exposing the artifact and artifice of representation. However, at the same time and by the same token, it lays the ground for the fantastic, not only situating the fictional on the same ontological level as the real but also making the act of configuration an integral part of the figure. This participatory trace within narrative metalepsis becomes even more accentuated in narratives that mix different sign systems, such as the comic book, or the networks of transmedia narratives. Metalepsis here functions as a threshold to immersion; rhetorical metalepsis becomes ontological, affecting the very reality of the reader.

It should now be clear that the concept of metalepsis functions as a feedback loop between system and environment. Framing metalepsis within neocybernetic theory, and a media-ecological aesthetics, the transgression of ontological metalepsis accordingly becomes a form for participation aligned to the paradoxical closure of sympoiesis, in effect transforming environment into system and vice versa. To this extent, to properly assess the manner in which the Möbius strip of ontological metalepsis involves the actual – and not merely the implied – reader, a concept of operationally ajar closure is needed.<sup>198</sup>

Metaleptic transgressions abound in *The Unwritten*. In fact, the central plot hinges on metalepsis, where Tom Taylor is transformed into the fictional character of Tommy Taylor, in essence imbued with magical properties. This transformation, when a story world on a lower hierarchical level – here the story of Tommy Taylor as presented in the novels written by Wilson Taylor – imposes on the main story of

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<sup>197</sup> Sonja Klimek argues that “Continuidad de los parques” never actually performs a metalepsis, since there is no way to determine, from within the represented storyworlds, if there has been a transgression of diegetic levels or not. There is no transgression represented; only formally inferred. The pure fantastic of Todorov’s analysis would then correspond to this inability to interpret the narration in a satisfactory fashion. This is, however, an interpretation that overlooks the importance of the material and formal aspects of narration, and their participatory function. Klimek, 2011, p 30-31

<sup>198</sup> Thus while Marie-Laure Ryan discusses the feedback loops of metalepsis in relation to Gödel’s theorem and Douglas Hofstadter’s notion of strange loops, she nevertheless locates ontological metalepsis exclusively within the fictional world, as a closed, and self-regulating loop. Ryan, 2006, p 211ff



the narrative, has been described as ascending metalepsis.<sup>199</sup> Both ascending metalepsis and its opposite, descending metalepsis (i.e. when a character or an object descends into a story world of a lower order) are integral narrative techniques for the fantastic.<sup>200</sup> Both are frequently employed in *The Unwritten*.

### Configurative textuality

Issue no. 17 of *The Unwritten* – “The Many Lives of Lizzie Hexam” – tells the back-story of Lizzie Hexam, the graduate student whose revelation about the false identity of Tom Taylor in the first issue initiates his transformation into a being with supernatural powers and who, as the story evolves become his sidekick, friend and lover. Just like the boy-wizard Tommy Taylor, Lizzie Hexam too is a fictional identity. Ostensibly so, her name taken from Charles Dickens’s book *Our Mutual Friend* (1865). Lizzie’s back-story reveals close ties to Wilson Taylor, who, in a manner perhaps similar to the subliminal brainwashing perpetrated on his son, has implanted a fictional identity – essentially derived from Dickens’s novel – on Lizzie at a young age. Thus Lizzie Hexam functions as a liminal character within the narrative, not only marking the liminal space of the fantastic but also being capable of transferring this space to others, as she does in the first issue. She is a testament to the transformative powers of narrative, and as such, in a story about the power of stories, holds a crucial position.

But even more important is the manner in which the story of Lizzie Hexam is told. Issue no 17 of *The Unwritten*, published initially in an alternate edition in oversized magazine format, is structured as a do-it-yourself adventure, where the reader actively configures the narrative, following a given set of guides and options (Figure 11b). Accordingly, “The Many Lives of Lizzie Hexam” has no given chronology but consists of a certain number of discrete textual units – each



Figure 11a: Mike Carey and Peter Gross, *The Unwritten* #17, “The Many Lives of Lizzie Hexam”

<sup>199</sup> See Karin Kukkonen, “Metalepsis in Popular Culture: An Introduction”, in Karin Kukkonen and Sonja Klimek (Eds.), *Metalepsis in Popular Culture* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2011), p

<sup>200</sup> Sonja Klimek argues this point in “Metalepsis in Fantasy Fiction”, in Karin Kukkonen and Sonja Klimek (Eds.), *Metalepsis in Popular Culture* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2011), p



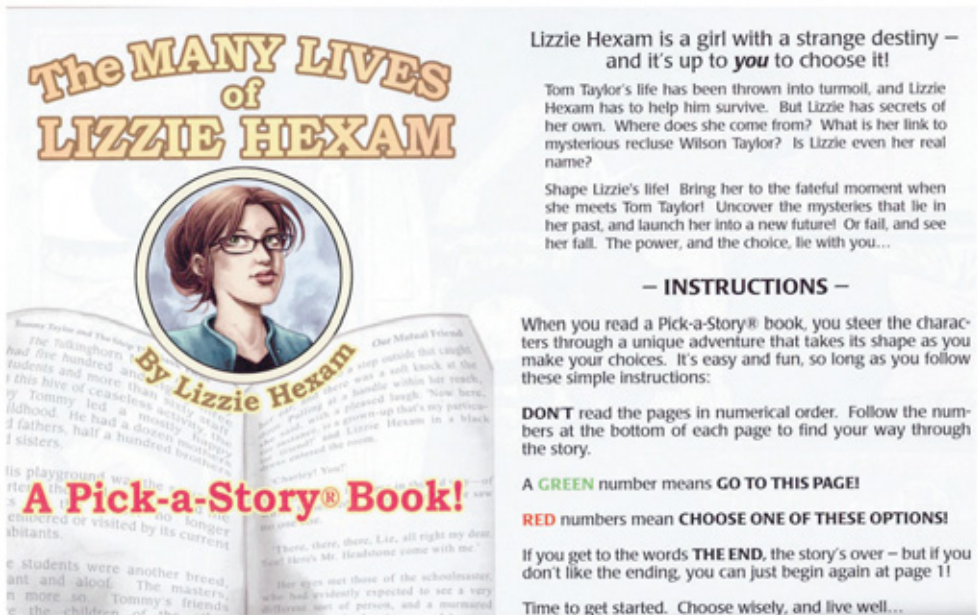


Figure 11b: Mike Carey and Peter Gross, *The Unwritten* #17, “The Many Lives of Lizzie Hexam”

textual unit, this being a comic book, comprising different semiotic modalities, such as words, images and design – that can be traversed following different pathways. “If you get to the words THE END”, the reader is informed in a short introduction to the format, “the story’s over – but if you don’t like the ending, you can just begin again at page 1.”<sup>201</sup> Depending on the choices made by the reader, different texts are generated, different “lives of Lizzie Hexam”.

The liminal status of Lizzie’s identity is here materially grounded in the medium. Within the main narrative of *The Unwritten*, “The Many Lives of Lizzie Hexam” is played out during a catatonic episode Lizzie suffers at the end of issue no 16, after learning that her identity is a fabrication and that her real name is Jane Waxman. How the identity of Lizzie Hexam came to replace Jane Waxman is what is narrated in “The Many Lives of Lizzie Hexam”. However, it is up to the reader to actualize this narrative, putting it together from a number of textual units. The most central of these units tells how Jane Waxman had suffered a mental breakdown of unknown origin and diagnosis at an early age, when she had, somehow, become – or rather, started to channel – the identity of the Dickensian heroine Lizzie Hexam. This process is represented as a psychic possession, figuring the eight-year-old Jane as a paranormal medium. The supernatural is here presented very much in a

<sup>201</sup> Mike Carey & Peter Gross, *The Unwritten* #17, np

manner consistent with the historical genre of the fantastic, as Todorov describes it. “The Many Lives of Lizzie Hexam” introduces an unexplainable event, the complete transformation of a real identity into a fictional one. This event could either be construed as the symptoms of schizophrenia – and particularly how schizophrenia has been represented in the literature of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century fantastic – or as a sign of paranormal possession. Here, the hesitation and uncertainty of the fantastic prescribed by Todorov is not represented within the narrative; it is not a matter of interpreting events, not on the part of any of the characters, nor on the part of an implied reader. Instead, the moment of hesitation, of vacillation between two different paths through the narrative, is presented repeatedly as a choice between textual units. And what is more, as opposed to the hermeneutical vacillation Todorov discusses, here the choices materially alter the reading of the comic book. The different pathways result in different reading patterns, in varying sequences of pages turned, exerting distinct, and different, movements on the part of the reader.

These different actualizations of “The Many Lives of Lizzie Hexam” impact on the larger narrative of *The Unwritten*. Some actualizations are more drastic than others. Choosing between varying motives for Wilson Taylor’s actions, for example – as in textual unit 7, where the choice lies between a “phantasmagorical excursion into a world where magic is real” and “the sleazy and ruthless brainwashing of a vulnerable child” (Figure 12) – affects the ethos of the whole comic, and naturally influences how it is read and interpreted, but does not pose insurmountable problems of continuity.



Figure 12: Mike Carey and Peter Gross, *The Unwritten* #16, “The Many Lives of Lizzie Hexam”

The reader can still continue reading, even though the moral evaluation of the narrative might be altered. Other choices pose more pressing problems to the continuity of *The Unwritten*. Opting for medical treatment of the schizophrenia, and thus interpreting the supernatural as an uncanny, but ultimately natural event, brings the narrative to a stop. Textual unit 36, showing Lizzie in a psychiatric ward, heavily sedated, reads as a commentary on Todorov's insistence on the dangers of allegory, of interpretation as in effect anesthetizing the fantastic. At this point, the reader simply cannot keep on reading and has either to quit the comic entirely or to regress and find another pathway. Treating supernatural possession as a medical affliction is perfectly valid; it is one of the options available to the reader of the fantastic, as Todorov teaches, and since "The Many Lives of Lizzie Hexam" is very much a story about the powers of fantastic imagination, it is naturally an option here. But it also becomes clear that such a reading eliminates the liminal space necessary for the fantastic to proliferate.

Here, it becomes clear how the material properties of the comic book – *this* particular comic book – become crucial to the reading experience, and to establishing the liminal space of the fantastic. Reading "The Many Lives of Lizzie Hexam" is no longer a mere cognitive enterprise, or rather: cognition here becomes a matter of materiality, of the embodied experience of an actual physical engagement with a material object. Rather than as a text to be read and interpreted, issue no. 17 of *The Unwritten* presents itself as a site for configuration and embodied cognition. The comic book becomes a configurative text, involving the reader in a cybernetic feedback loop, in the perception-event of sympoiesis.

In his influential study *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Espen Aarseth describes this kind of configurative text as *cybertext*. A cybertext is a text whose material configuration hinges on the nontrivial engagement of a reader. It is not the multiple virtual versions of "The Many Lives of Lizzie Hexam" that characterizes it as a cybertext but rather the physical effort that each actualized version entails. In a very concrete fashion, the comic book demands a distinctive set of actions from its reader. Aarseth calls this nontrivial effort ergodic, "using a term appropriated from physics that derives from the Greek words *ergon* and *hodos*, meaning 'work' and 'path'. In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text."<sup>202</sup> Cybertexts are ergodic texts.

Aarseth uses a strict definition of cybertext, limiting the term to texts where the ergodic engagement generates a new material product. Here, he strives to distinguish ergodicity from interpretation, and the study of texts as games – ludology – from the study of texts as stories – narratology. The gaps in a cybertext are not to be understood

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<sup>202</sup> Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: perspectives on ergodic literature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), p 1

as narrative gaps, argues Aarseth, but as instances of generating a cybertextual subjectivity: “The ‘openings’ of determinate cybertexts are not gaps, in Iser’s sense, since they are not used to complement the written parts in a game of imagination; rather, they are used as a filter, in which only the ‘correct’ response lets the user proceed through the text.”<sup>203</sup> Ludology focuses on the material properties of meaning-making processes, while narratology deals with interpreting and ordering units of meaning.

Rather than describing a certain type of object, cybertext theory can be used as a guide for participatory reading. From a cybernetic understanding of information, all mediating objects are to some extent cybertextual; they all involve nontrivial effort, an ergodic moment, as it were. To this extent, Ian Bogost situates the ergodic textuality of Aarseth’s cybertext theory in a wider framework, with a much larger range of applicability: “I will suggest”, Bogost writes, “that any medium – poetic, literary, cinematic, computational – can be read as a configurative system, an arrangement of discrete, interlocking units of expressive meaning.” Bogost calls these “instances of procedural expression” *unit operations*.<sup>204</sup> Bogost argues that a configuration of a unit operation functions as the ratification of an assemblage and suggests that the configurative textuality of textgames and cybertexts can be understood as a critical concept, based on an understanding of an event as a distribution of agencies.<sup>205</sup> Thus configurative textuality indicates the emergence of the medium as an assemblage. To this extent, a unit operation describes the circumstances under which the operational closure of a system generates a new organization, by structural coupling.

This is why *unit* becomes helpful as a name for objects or things. It is an ambivalent term, indifferent to the nature of what it names. It is also isolated, unitary, and specific, not simply the part of a whole or ontologically basic and indivisible like an atom. As I have argued elsewhere, ‘unit’ finds precedent in systems theory and complexity theory, including applications in biology, cybernetics, computer science, social theory, and the myriad other domains that seek to explain phenomena as the emergent effects of the autonomous actions of the interrelating parts of a system. Counterintuitively, a system and a unit represent three things at once: for one, a unit is isolated and unique. For another, a unit encloses a system – an entire universe’s worth. For yet another, a unit becomes part of another system – often many other systems – as it jostles about.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., p 111

<sup>204</sup> Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), p IX

<sup>205</sup> Bogost bases his notion of ratification on Alan Badiou’s critique of Deleuze and Guattari. Badiou suggests the notion of the event – and its momentary and axiomatic structuring of subjectivity and truth – as a way to imagine the emergence of individual assemblages within the flows and intensities of rhizomatic vectors, thereby countering the threat of holism he perceives as innate in the theory of the assemblage. Ibid., p 144

<sup>206</sup> Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology: or What It’s Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), p 25

Focusing on configurative textuality in the form of unit operations highlights the participatory aspects of textuality, and as such the concept of configurative textuality becomes a powerful critical tool for delineating a non-hermeneutical approach to the meaning production of cultural objects. Configurative texts map how operationally ajar systems, and systems and environments, are coupled and in turn generate new emergent couplings. This is how units operate, according to Bogost: “That is, things constantly machinate within themselves and mesh with one another, acting and reacting to properties and states while still keeping something secret.”<sup>207</sup> Configurative textuality becomes a description of how media ecologies operate as aesthetic systems, intricately intertwining ontogenesis with participation.

The case of Lizzie Hexam presents a textbook example of the liminal character of the fantastic. After her breakdown at the age of eight, Jane Waxman speaks as another person; she appears, to all intents and purposes, to have become another individual, by possession or delusion. This event cannot satisfactorily be explained by any existing scientific method within the storyworld. But rather than representing this liminal space within the narrative, it is presented to the reader as a cybertextual option. Through “The Many Lives of Lizzie Hexam”, the narrative of *The Unwritten* becomes intrinsically bound to the materiality of the comic book, presenting the ambiguous perception of the fantastic as emergent embodiment.

## Archontic Textuality

In the continuing rewriting of the cultural history of the fantastic executed in *The Unwritten*, creators Mike Carey and Peter Gross repeatedly enact the moment of configuration, materially – in an innovative use of the comic book format – as well as thematically, when Tommy Taylor moves between and intertwines storyworlds. The rewriting of the history of the fantastic performed by Wilson Taylor by writing his *Tommy Taylor* books presents a fictional universe largely corresponding to the history of the fantastic, with an important alteration to the impact of J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* books, whose cultural function Taylor’s books seem to have erased and supplanted. Rowling’s books are mentioned in *The Unwritten*, but seem to have had little cultural and commercial impact. However, the parasitical relation of Tommy Taylor to Harry Potter will not elude any reader of *The Unwritten*; it is explicit on almost every level, from the visual representation of the young boy-wizard Tommy to how the books are received within the fan community and the adaptations and merchandise generated by their success. Within the fictional universe of *The Unwritten*, Tommy Taylor has effectively worked backwards, just as Wilson Taylor intended, erasing his most prominent precursor. However, to the reader, if not to Tommy Tay-

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., p 27



lor, the trace of Harry Potter lingers.<sup>208</sup> Thus the story of Tommy Taylor presents itself as a configuration of the story of Harry Potter, in which Harry Potter's influence seems practically effaced.

Configuration here implies an organization that rewrites history and – in the form of an autopoietic system – seeks self-generation. To this extent, configuration also imposes a limit – albeit always insufficiently – on the possibilities of configuration, acting as if it is the first and the last of its kind. The operationally ajar closure of sympoiesis is thus supplanted by the operational closure of autopoiesis. The event of configuration here takes the form of instituting an archive, operating as Derrida describes in *Archive Fever*, that is, grounded both in commencement and in consignment. The organization generated by an archive is a matter of both time and law, says Derrida. Thus the archive generates a temporality; it orders its objects historically. But it does so by the power of the archon – and the archon is both the site of the archive, the archive as a material repository for the imprinted records, and the office wielding the power to order the archive. The archon is as much the site as the agent responsible for the site. According to Derrida, the archive, just like the genre, marks the intersection of law and singularity.

The archontic power, which also gathers the functions of unification, of identification, of classification, must be paired with what we will call the power of *consignation*. By consignation we do not only mean, in the ordinary sense of the word, the act of assigning residence or of entrusting so as to put in reserve (to consign, to deposit), in a place and on a substrate, but here the act of *consigning* through *gathering together signs*. It is not only the traditional *consignation*, that is, the written proof, but what all *consignatio* begins by presupposing. *Consignation* aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration. In an archive, there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity or *secret* which could separate (*secernere*), or partition, in an absolute manner. The archontic principle of the archive is also a principle of consignation, that is, of gathering together.<sup>209</sup>

Derrida's point is that no archive can fully erase heterogeneity, not without risking the "radical evil" of the "in-finite".<sup>210</sup> An archive is thus not a repetition of the past –

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<sup>208</sup> Though the presence of Harry Potter, as writer Mike Carey comments in an interview, is also filtered through the comic book character Timothy Hunter, the protagonist of *The Books of Magic* (1990) a comic book title that predates Harry Potter, and was initially created by Neil Gaiman. Interview with Allison Hallett, published in the online blog, *The Portland Mercury*: <http://www.portlandmercury.com/BlogtownPDX/archives/2010/01/07/an-qanda-with-the-unwrittens-mike-carey>

<sup>209</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p 3

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, p 20

it is not a self-regulating system that once and for all organizes its environment. In fact, Derrida conceptualizes the archive as a system-environment hybrid. An archive must always inscribe itself in – and be inscribed by – the objects it archives. As such an archive does not operate from a position of “meta-textual authority”. Instead, there will always remain a trace of exteriority within the archive: “One will never be able to objectivize it with no remainder. The archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed. It opens out of the future.”<sup>211</sup>

Borrowing Derrida’s notion of the open archive, Abigail Derecho – in a discussion of fan fiction – has described the kind of configurative text where the intertextual relationship is not only explicitly stated but forms an integral part of its aesthetics, as *archontic*.<sup>212</sup> Archontic texts actively engage in other texts, generating a set of textual versions. But more importantly, archontic texts relate to a specific consignment of the archive, functioning only in relation to a given organization which, while it is open in principle, nevertheless strives to regulate itself according to an originating structure.

To some extent the archontic principle conflates with the sympoiesis of configurative textuality and Derrida’s notion of participatory genres. Archontic texts ostensibly participate in the generation of another text, leaving a trace on the archive of that participation, while at the same time trying to enforce a new temporal and spatial configuration of the archive. An archontic text describes a distinct configuration of the archive; that is, in the form of a sympoietic feedback it is both system and environment, both the objects comprising the archive, and the regulating agencies structuring those objects. An archontic text must therefore be understood as a consignment of a specific meaning structure. This consignment, however, leaves the trace of an act of configuration that opens up the archive – as a distinct meaning structure – to participation and reconfiguration. On a textual level, *The Unwritten* enacts this tension between archontic meaning structure and participatory configuration. This tension is connected to the way the aesthetics of media ecologies implies an ecological understanding of ethics and politics, following Donna Haraway and Jane Bennett. Archontic textuality describes a distinct power relation, corresponding to a distinct distribution of agencies. An archontic text is in this sense a configurative text that enforces its self-regulation, striving to perpetuate an autonomous organization. In this sense, the archontic describes an archival desire within the configurative texts of media ecologies, an impulse to imbue the configurative with originating properties. But as the archontic is also a matter of sympoietic configuration, there will al-

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., p 68

<sup>212</sup> Derecho, Abigail, “Archontic literature”, in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, Karen Hellekson & Kristina Busse (eds) (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2006), p 75



ways remain a trace of heterogeneity within the archive. Archontic texts thus imply their own dissolution: the very act of enforcing a meaning structure opens up that structure to reconfiguration. This is the secret of archives, referred to by Derrida.

### **The secret in the wall: hypericon and metapicture**

In the discussion of cybertexts and configurative textuality, it was argued that cybernetic participation in the production of meaning – in the configuration of narrative – entails an event of distributed cognition, where the notion of an autonomous subjectivity is put out of play. In order to participate in configuration, subjectivity itself is configured. Here, the liminal space of the fantastic presupposes an experience that is materially situated in a perception where the human body consists of one amongst many participating factors. Jane Bennett argues that this type of composition points to the agency of things beyond the production of meaning: “In this assemblage, *objects* appeared as *things*, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the context in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics.”<sup>213</sup> It has been argued in this chapter that a media-ecological approach to the fantastic focuses on what objects do rather than what they mean: it investigates ontogenesis, and not ontology. It has also been pointed out that behind this agency of things, behind the affective character of the material environment lies a remainder of heterogeneity, never entirely exhausted by a system’s organization, and referred to by both Bogost and Derrida as a “secret”. If the passage between worlds is a central component of the fantastic – and inasmuch as every perception-event is a sympoietic wordling, in Haraway’s sense, media ecologies map passages between worlds – then in *The Uwritten* this passage is initially shielded by a secret.

Shortly after having been transformed into his fictional identity, Tommy Taylor travels to the Villa Diodati in the Swiss Alps just outside Geneva. A significant location in the history of the fantastic, built by one of John Milton’s friends, the villa is known for having hosted that famous literary competition which saw the genesis of John Polidori’s *The Vampyre* and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* in 1816. It is also where Tommy Taylor – as Tom Taylor – spent a large part of his childhood. Now hosting a small gathering of writers of the fantastic, it does not take long after his arrival before Pullman descends upon the house and starts to murder its occupants, in a fashion corresponding to the sensationalist subgenre of each writer.

Searching for clues about his new identity, Tommy Taylor together with Lizzie Hexam, stumbles upon one of the secrets of the house, a safe hidden behind a painting by William Blake (Figure 13). Inside, they find an enigmatic note, presumably

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<sup>213</sup> Bennett, 2010, p 5.

written by Wilson Taylor, and a loose doorknob. The doorknob leads to Wilson Taylor's secret study, but more importantly, it is a magical doorknob, an artifact from the *Tommy Taylor* books, that allows travelling between worlds. It is the object that allows access to the storyworlds Tommy travels.

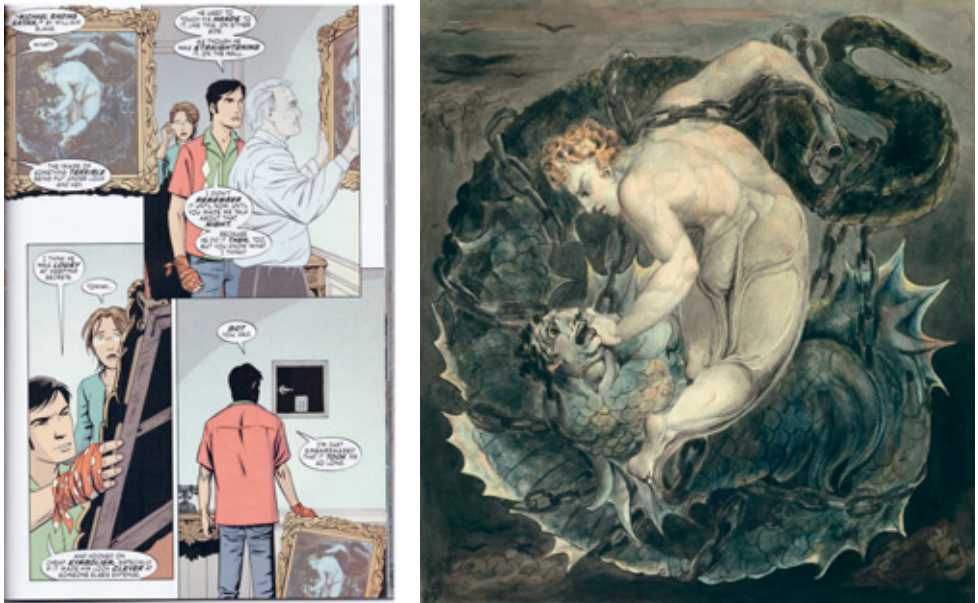


Figure 13: Left: Mike Carey, Peter Gross, *The Unwritten* #4, 2009; Right: William Blake, *Michael Binding Satan* (Harvard Art Museum/Fogg Museum, Gift of W. A. White)

As has already been noted, media ecologies work by the machinic phylum, and just as the doorknob lets Tommy Taylor move between different, unconnected, storyworlds, the sympoiesis of media-ecological configuration cuts across different domains of media systems. Marcel O’Gorman theorizes this process as hypericonomy, drawing on W. J. T. Mitchell’s discussion of metapictures, or hypericons, as “picture theory”, that is, as images – or rather as units, in Bogost’s sense – that encapsulates an episteme.<sup>214</sup> The hypericon in its simplest form is a self-referential picture, that is, a picture that in some way thematizes its ontological status as image, thereby destabilizing the levels of framings and borders surrounding the representation.<sup>215</sup> In

<sup>214</sup> Marcel O’Gorman, *E-Crit: digital media, critical theory and the humanities* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), p 5ff

<sup>215</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) p 153; Mitchell, 1994, p 35-82

theory, the hypericon, by transgressing the boundaries of representation, functions as a unique event, breaking free from the context and confinement of surrounding structuring principles. The hypericon is in this sense a subversive, to some extent revolutionary figure, calling into question “the structure of ‘inside and outside’, first- and second-order representation, on which the whole concept of ‘meta-’ is based.”<sup>216</sup> Most hypericons – if not all – are surrounded, however, by a layer of framing, albeit of infinite regression, as in the case of the *mise-en-abyme* provoked by a picture-within-a-picture. Thus, according to Mitchell:

[M]etapictures elicit, not just a double vision, but a double voice, and a double relation between language and visual experience. If every picture only makes sense inside a discursive frame, an ‘outside’ of descriptive, interpretive language, metapictures call into question the relation of language to image as an inside-outside structure. They interrogate the authority of the speaking subject over the seen image.<sup>217</sup>

Metapictures, or hypericons, in O’Gorman’s application, function as nodes for participation and configuration: “They are machines for generating theories, or even theories in themselves. The picture itself, when subjected to this approach, acts like a site for investigating the information networks that made it possible.”<sup>218</sup> O’Gorman is primarily interested in digital systems, and particularly in digital archives, but hypericonicity can potentially function as a model for investigating movements across domains in any kind of materiality. As a self-referential loop the hypericon foregrounds the remainder of any system, thus evincing an ecological aspect to media and archives, digital and non-digital alike. Roger Whitson and Jason Whittaker take a similar approach to the relation between archive and ecology, arguing that the “zoamorphosis” of William Blake’s artistic practice, understood as “a creative act that emerges in collaboration with others in the present and the past” and which can “expand consciousness and change reality”<sup>219</sup>, generates “an always emergent and ever-changing Blakean archive.”<sup>220</sup>

The three main chapters of this dissertation map three different media ecologies of the fantastic. While the investigation will to some extent consist of a mapping of three different archives, the focus on configuration and sympoiesis will nevertheless highlight how archives – as well as media and genres – are always also ecologies. This

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<sup>216</sup> Mitchell, 1994, p 42

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., p. 68

<sup>218</sup> O’Gorman, 2006, p 19

<sup>219</sup> Roger Whitson & Jason Whittaker, *William Blake and the Digital Humanities: Collaboration, Participation and Social Media*, Routledge, New York/London, 2013, p 5

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., p 162

method will accordingly describe the ontogenesis, and not the ontology, of the fantastic. To this extent, a media-ecological approach to the aesthetics of the fantastic will offer a non-hermeneutical, non-modernist, and non-humanist model of literary participation. In this aspiration, the following investigation is in alignment with Marcel O’Gorman’s hopes for the hypericonomy of metapictures:

Hypericonomy works by unearthing and foregrounding those divergent responses which would otherwise be repressed in the course of conducting scholarly research. The purpose of this foregrounding, however, is not to interpret the picture, or to offer an authoritative reading of it in the conventional sense, but to draw on the picture as a tool for invention, as a generator of concepts and linkages unavailable by conventional scholarly practice. This is how hypericonomy breaks out of the hermeneutical circle.<sup>221</sup>

## Ekphrasis

Playing on the relationship between different forms of art and media has historically been an important technique for the fantastic. Francois Rigolot – a Renaissance scholar – argues that ekphrasis could be understood as the quintessential mode for the fantastic, in fact defining the fantastic as “a displaced mode of ekphrastic representation.”<sup>222</sup> Rigolot bases his assumption roughly on the same historical material as Todorov, that is, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century French genre of *conte fantastique*. In an analysis of Mérimée’s *Vénus d’Ille* (1835), in which the supernatural animation of a statue is the nexus of fantasy, Rigolot outlines the narratological function of ekphrasis in constructing the uncertainty of the fantastic. The active component of ekphrasis, the animating force that classic rhetoric calls *enargeia*, which presents as living an object of representation, works in two ways, argues Rigolot. On the one hand, it imbues a strong sense of presence and verisimilitude; on the other, it always functions as a reminder of the fictitious character of the representing object. Here, Rigolot touches on a displacement in the definition of ekphrasis, a displacement that could be made productive in a media-ecological understanding of the fantastic.

The modern concept of ekphrasis as a verbal description of a visual representation emerged sometime in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, and the use of the term ekphrasis in this sense became widespread around the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>223</sup> This is when ekphrasis is formulated as a literary genre, retroactively configuring the

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<sup>221</sup> O’Gorman, 2006, p 12

<sup>222</sup> Rigolot, 1997, p 99

<sup>223</sup> Webb, Ruth *Ekphrasis, Imagination and persuasion in ancient rhetorical theory and practice*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p 5ff

history of ekphrasis. However, the classical definition of ekphrasis is much more comprehensive than merely denoting verbal descriptions of visual objects. Within classical rhetoric, ekphrasis encompasses any verbal description that generates a sense of vivid presence, a description that transfers reading (or listening, rather, since the experience of classical ekphrasis was generally an aural experience) into an immediate and sensual experience, as if the narrated object appears before the eyes of the audience. Even though there is certain stress on sight and making objects appear before the eyes of the reader, the classical definition of ekphrasis is not limited to the visual senses.<sup>224</sup> It does, however, imply a notion of language as an embodied experience, as grounded in the senses. Ekphrasis, in the classical sense, then, entails an understanding of language as physical, as something exerting a certain amount of force on the individual body involved. Ekphrasis corporeally imprints an experience, leaving a mark in the body. In this sense, the classical definition of ekphrasis is tied to the concept of *phantasia*. Quintilian discusses the *enargeia* of ekphrasis (in Quintilian, ekphrasis is narration with *enargeia*) as the power of visualization, but where visualization involves an actual presence within the body: “What the Greeks call *phantasiai* (we call them ‘visions’, if you will), are the means by which images of absent things are represented to the mind in such a way that we seem to see them with our eyes and to be in their presence.”<sup>225</sup>

The classical understanding of ekphrasis does not necessarily involve a verbal description of a physical object – although many classical examples of ekphrasis, such as Homer’s rendering of Achilles’ shield, do. Instead, classical ekphrasis is a question of vivid description, of immersion and immediacy.<sup>226</sup> It is a matter of transferring the language of representation into a physical sensation. To this extent, classical ekphrasis is, as Cecilia Lindhé notes, a matter of embodiment: “in modern practice of ekphrasis, focus lies on the ontological status of the visual object where the visual is the quality of the referent, whereas the rhetoricians emphasized the process of visualization and the effect it had on the listener.”<sup>227</sup> Lindhé suggests basing the concept of ekphrasis not on a print-based notion of literature but rather on the affordances of digital media, arguing that the concept of digital ekphrasis moves the emphasis “from the problem of representing a visual object with words to the user’s

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid., p 22

<sup>225</sup> Quintilian Book 6: 6.2.29-30, translated by Ruth Webb. Ibid., p 95

<sup>226</sup> The attitude towards language – written and spoken – was different in antiquity, argues Webb. Texts – whether written or spoken – were not primarily treated as objects to be interpreted, as repositories of meaning. Language affects the body. “Where a modern professional reader, the critic, tends to treat his or her subject as an object of analysis, the ancient critic stresses the impact of the text.” Ibid., p 24

<sup>227</sup> Cecilia Lindhé, “A Visual Sense is Born in the Fingertips’: Towards a Digital Ekphrasis”, in *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, 2013, Volume 7, Number 1, np

bodily interaction with an environment, her relational experience where the words act as a quasi-physical force acting upon her. Digital interfaces direct attention to the physical interaction and to the materiality of work, and thus encourage a rediscovery of a bodily/tactile and multisensory experience in relation also to non-digital artifacts.”<sup>228</sup> Clearly, digital ekphrasis is a concept that relates to the sympoiesis of media ecologies, and in extension, to the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic.

Rigolot argues that the fantastic tale turns description into narration. Description obtains agency in ekphrasis and in a story of the fantastic.<sup>229</sup> Read against Todorov’s claim that the fantastic has a tendency to use figurative language in a literal sense, Rigolot argues that the transposition of narration and description in ekphrasis becomes the liminal site of the fantastic: “My contention is that the literalizing process is not actualized – as Todorov seems to believe – in the unfolding of the narrative. On the contrary, the ekphrastic moment is precisely the rhetorical locus where the ‘event’ shines forth. /.../ In the discourse of the fantastic, description already exhibits its metonymic consequences. It has become the *metaphor of a metonymy* as well as the metaphor of a literalized metaphor.”<sup>230</sup> Thus the distinction between description and narration, that which – according to Genette – “is one of the major features of our literary consciousness”<sup>231</sup> is dislodged in the fantastic. This brings the modern concept of ekphrasis closer to its use in classical rhetoric, where the *enargeia* of an effective ekphrasis has a physical impact. Accordingly, this notion of ekphrasis – close to the digital ekphrasis proposed by Lindhé – is a matter of agency, a force wielded upon the body precisely when description comes alive, when thing becomes narration.

W. J. T. Mitchell notes that the function of ekphrasis – both in the broader sense of the classical definition as *enargeia* and as a literary genre – entails an essentially impossible moment, a transformation of verbal sequence into physical object. “Something special and magical is required of language”<sup>232</sup>, says Mitchell. This magic, which is essentially a fetishistic magic, is grounded in the manner in which ekphrasis always presupposes the presence of its other: “The ekphrastic image acts,” and here Mitchell is primarily referring to the modern genre of ekphrasis, “like a sort of unapproachable and unrepresentable ‘black hole’ in the verbal structure, entirely absent from it, but shaping and affecting it in fundamental ways.”<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., np

<sup>229</sup> Rigolot, 1997, p 102

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., p 103

<sup>231</sup> Gérard Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p 133

<sup>232</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p 158

<sup>233</sup> Ibid. p 158



The modern genre of ekphrasis plays with the affordances ascribed to different media. As static description is turned into dynamic narrative, ekphrastic poetry questions, challenges and overthrows the, at least within Western cultural history, widespread notion that images have spatial extension, while words unfold temporally.<sup>234</sup> This does not, however, imply that images and words – or any other arbitrary sign system, whether considered as art or as media – have essential qualities to be overthrown, spatial, temporal or otherwise. Instead, by constantly probing the unrepresentable “black hole” of representation, by constantly tracing the other in representation, ekphrasis reveals how these characteristics emerge as semiotic systems rather than as essential qualities. Ekphrasis thus shows how meaning – semiotic systems – is grounded in material differences, but that these differences always remain beyond the system of representation. “One lesson of a general semiotics, then, is that there is, semantically speaking (that is, in the pragmatics of communication symbolic behavior, expression, signification) no essential difference between texts and images; the other lesson is that there are important differences between visual and verbal media at the level of sign-types, forms, materials of representation, and institutional traditions.”<sup>235</sup> Ekphrasis, both in the classical sense of *enargeia*, and in the modern generic sense of a verbal description of a non-verbal object, brings forth the material ground for meaning-making processes. Ekphrasis reveals the material agency of representation; and particularly viewed as digital ekphrasis following Lindhé’s conceptualization, it accordingly becomes a figure for the operationally ajar closure of ecosystems, emerging as a systemic organization of a heterogenetic environment.

#### 4. The return of the whale

One technique for revealing the agency of things, argues Jane Bennett, is anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphic thinking, counter to the demystifying ideals of rationalistic humanism, fosters a necessary sensibility to the unnamable side of things: “A touch of anthropomorphism, then, can catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations.”<sup>236</sup> The collective plays an integral part in the war between Tommy Taylor and the Cabal. The conflict could in fact be described as a war for the power of the collective. Consensus reality is here upheld by an act of collective creativity, emerging as the sum of the world’s meaning-making processes. Configurative textuality is the machine for this particu-

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<sup>234</sup> This is one of the bearing assumptions in G. E. Lessing’s treatise *Laokoon* (1766), and has been the foundation for many of the different historical discussions on the differences between modes of representation.

<sup>235</sup> Mitchell, 1994, p 161

<sup>236</sup> Bennett, 2010, p 99



lar war. With the massive success of the *Tommy Taylor* books, Wilson Taylor has created a mythopoiesis with ontogenetic powers; reality – down to the very laws of nature – is altered by the collective beliefs generated by the Tommy Taylor stories. However, this is no grand narrative, unimpeachable and monumental; rather, it is an ecology of objects being constantly configured and reconfigured by fan community and readers alike. This ecology demands and presupposes participation within the distributed agency of sympoietic subjectivity. It is very much a question of a struggle for discursive power, but it is a power, as we have seen in Derrida’s notion of the archive, constantly open to ecological sympoiesis.

In the story world of *The Unwritten* the *Tommy Taylor* books have become, with their success, a vast transmedia network of interconnected things and narratives, an ecology of configurative texts. As an open-ended structure, this network opposes the autonomous and hierarchical version of storytelling used by the Cabal in their attempt to subdue and control humanity. The *Tommy Taylor* books are designed to function as a parasite within the cultural system created by the Cabal, transforming culture from within. To a large degree, what is enacted here is a confrontation between a modernist and humanist notion of literature, largely based on the ideology of print culture, and a notion of literature where narration is a matter of a configurative textuality. A modernist, disinterested aesthetics is pitted against a participatory and collaborative aesthetics: a paradigm of interpretation against a paradigm of participation.

Issue 31.5 of *The Unwritten* presents, in three separate episodes, parts of Wilson Taylor’s investigation into the history of the Cabal.<sup>237</sup> A history of unwriting is exposed, where the Cabal insistently locates and effaces from recorded history any traces of dissident and subversive writing. So the infamous – and historically debatable – burning of books and burying of scholars in China in 221 BCE is ascribed to the machinations of the Cabal. However, with the invention of the Gutenberg printing press, the tactics of elimination are supplanted by a tactic of co-optation. The final third of the issue, set during the siege and sacking of the German city of Mainz in 1462, narrates how the Cabal fails to prevent the dissemination of print technology and therefore resolves to use it for their purposes. The victorious invader Bishop Adolphus, after manhandling Gutenberg and appropriating his shop, comments: “We’ve tried being the blade, and it did not serve. Perhaps it’s time to be the seeds.” The literature generated by the Cabal, using printing presses, is used to subjugate humanity.

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<sup>237</sup> The story arc “Tommy Taylor and the War of Words”, running issues 31-35 and collected in *The Unwritten 6* (2012), ran alternating chapters, 31.5-35.5 with backstories for some of the more important supporting characters: Pullman, Madame Rausch and Wilson Taylor.

Thus *The Unwritten* stages a conflict between two types of narrative and two versions of subjectivity and individuality. One is authoritarian and hierarchical, subjugating individuals in the form of an organization in accordance with and structurally coupled to the self-generating autopoietic organization of the Cabal. The other is anarchic and participatory, laying the ground for sympoietic individuation, in which the emergence of an organization coincides with the operationally ajar closure of structurally coupled ecosystems. While these two versions of narrative clearly coincide with two distinct political and ethical systems, seemingly transferrable within the Manichean epic of *The Unwritten* into the categories of good and evil, it is important to remember that the relation between archive and ecology, as well as that between sympoiesis and autopoiesis as Beth Dempster notes, is not an exclusive binary, but rather functioning as a contrasting heuristics at opposite ends of a conceptual continuum. Operational closure, even operationally ajar closure, always involves a selection, and in this sense organization always means a limitation and a reduction of heterogeneity. Organization always entails an implementation of power. At the same time, an organization is always ecological, in the sense that it is – following Hansen’s argument – always an emergence of a system-environment hybrid. What then might appear as two opposite poles perpetually at odds with each other is rather to be understood as an entangled mesh of emerging organizations.

In the end, the whale saves narrative. In the concluding story arc of *The Unwritten*, Tommy Taylor returns to *The Pequod*. In order to save the mortally wounded Leviathan – who in the story world of *The Unwritten* embodies the ontogenesis of the fantastic – Tommy has transformed himself and his antagonists by “turning the story around, like a Moebius strip”<sup>238</sup> into characters in *Moby Dick*. By an act of metalepsis – whether descending or ascending seems perfectly irrelevant, as notions of textual levels are indefinitely destabilized at this point – they are now on the deck of the whaler (Figure 14).

In the strange loops of ecological organization, there is no position outside from which to observe and structure the archive; consequently, there is no in-finite horizon, no originating temporality, there is merely ongoingness, the paradoxically open closure of ontogenesis. And while these closures generate new worlds, new momentary organizations of systems and environments, there is always a remainder, the trace of heterogeneity – the secret in the wall – from which new organizations emerge. After the whale, a new world awakens. At the end of *The Unwritten*, the whole story – that epic battle for creation between Tommy Taylor and the Cabal that had been an ongoing title from Vertigo Comics between 2009 and 2015 – has been unwritten. Nothing happened. Nevertheless, a remainder lingers. Winding down,

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<sup>238</sup> Mike Carey and Peter Gross, *The Unwritten: Apocalypse*, #12 (Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2015) n.p.



Figure 14: Mike Carey, Peter Gross, *The Unwritten: Apocalypse #12*, 2015

the last pages return briefly to some of the protagonists, the friends and allies of Tommy Taylor, whose lives are now situated in a continuity where a Tommy Taylor never existed and where Harry Potter is the uncontested boy-wizard-genius of the world. There is a stillness there, a sadness, in the finitude of the living, of understanding, as Tommy Taylor states “your place in the ecosystem”. But there is also movement, a secret passage that opens up to new couplings, leading to new confederations, as Wilson Taylor, in the last pages of the comic book, descends, once again, into the underworld (Figure 15).



Figure 15: Mike Carey, Peter Gross, *The Unwritten Apocalypse #12* (2015)

It is tempting to read *The Unwritten* against Hayles' comments on the ideologies of print. Print culture has generated a notion of literature that focuses on an autonomous and stable object of meaning, engaging autonomous readers in an act of interpretation. And inasmuch as the modern notion of literature is largely based on concepts tied to print culture, it should be clear that the fantastic just isn't literature. But the case, of course, is more complicated than that. Undoubtedly there is an *ideal* of the literary generated within the so-called Gutenberg galaxy that opposes the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic. But it is also the case, as Marshall McLuhan claimed half a century ago, that this galaxy is dominated by a tension, perhaps inaugurated by Blake and the Romantics as McLuhan says, within literature itself: "Henceforth, literature will be at war with itself and with the social mechanics of conscious goals and motivations. For the matter of literary vision will be collective and mythic, while the forms of literary expression and communication will be individualistic, segmental, and mechanical."<sup>239</sup>

The following three chapters, and the concluding discussion, will elaborate on this tension. It will become clear that the critical discourse on the literature of the fantastic needs to abandon the individualistic forms of literary expression alluded to by McLuhan. Instead, the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic emerges as an embodied collective, as a confederation of things, non-hermeneutic, non-humanist, non-modern. Mythic. However, this is not an uncontested emergence, as the participatory sympoiesis of configurative textuality is consistently haunted by the presence of the archon. If this is not the war over the powers of ontogenesis waged by the Cabal, it is perhaps a war over the vibrant materiality of collaborative creativity, a war for non-humanist humanities. This might well be the unwritten history of the whale, the final lesson and secret which that monster of the deep, The Leviathan, at the conclusion of *The Unwritten*, bestows upon the hero of the tale, Tommy Taylor.

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<sup>239</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy, The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011 (1962)), p 304

## Chapter 2:

# The Media Ecology of Middle-earth

One evening in the March of 1436 Master Samwise Gamgee was in his study at Bag End. He was sitting at the old well-worn desk, and with many pauses for thought he was writing in his slow round hand on sheets of loose paper. Propped up on a stand at his side was a large red book in manuscript.

Not long before he had been reading aloud from it to his family. For the day was a special one: the birthday of his daughter Elanor. That evening before supper he had come at last to the very end of the Book. The long progress through its many chapters, even with omissions that he had thought advisable, had taken some months, for he only read aloud on great days. At the birthday reading, besides Elanor, Frodo-lad had been present, and Rosie-lass, and young Merry and Pippin; but the other children had not been there. The Red Book was not for them yet, and they were safely in bed.

Christopher Tolkien, J. R. R. Tolkien, "The second version of the Epilogue",  
*History of Middle-earth IX: Sauron Defeated* (1992), p 121

He drew a deep breath. 'Well, I'm back,' he said.

J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (1955), p 1031

### Note on the text: the materiality of genre

The following chapter is an investigation into the media-ecological aesthetics of J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973). At times it might seem a lengthy exposition, meandering and repetitious. While no one but its author is to blame, the stylistic flaws of the chapter are also to some extent contingent on its subject matter. The investigation here seeks to perform a double movement. On the one hand, it wishes to map a media ecology of Middle-earth. On the other hand, it is intent on delineating a specific, media-ecological aesthetics operative in the literary narratives of Middle-earth. The latter part of the investigation should pose no problem, taking the form of a fairly traditional analysis of a literary object. The first part of the investigation, however, might be more demanding of the reader, as it involves tracing the distribution of agency between discrete objects, whose eventual relation-of-nonrelation will – it is argued – comprise a media ecology of ontogenesis. Moving between categories and domains, the objects whose structural coupling will be indicated pertain to different orders but are nevertheless treated as ontologically equal. A media ecology of



Middle-earth will accordingly enmesh such objects that are traditionally regarded as media – books, talks, illustrations, films, games, and so on – but will also treat other less traditional material as media, in the sense that was defined in the previous chapter. Thus philology is part of the media ecology of Middle-earth, as are copyright and editorial practice and fandom. While the two parts of the investigation are in no terms isolated practices, and continuously intermingle throughout the chapter, there is nevertheless a strong slant towards mapping a media ecology in the first half of the chapter, whereas the second half is largely occupied with analyzing a media-ecological aesthetics within narrative segments. In this sense, the argument for a media-ecological approach to Tolkien's work and aesthetics is made on two different but convergent levels of distinction: it theorizes both the reading practice actualized by a narrative situation and the cultural practice by which Tolkien's narratives have, to a remarkable degree of fecundity, been structurally coupled to other objects over the last fifty years or so. Or rather, by using a media-ecological model, it is argued that these two practices cut across levels of distinction.

In this manner, the following chapter offers one answer to two interrelated questions. The first question pertains to Tolkien's role within the genre of fantasy. The second relates to the function of the genres of the fantastic within contemporary fan culture, within what Henry Jenkins' has theorized as participatory culture and media convergence.<sup>240</sup> Brian Attebery places Tolkien's work at the center the fantasy genre, arguing that literary works of fantasy resemble Tolkien's work in three fundamental ways. Firstly, "the essential content is the impossible"<sup>241</sup>. That is, the work presents a break with consensus reality. Secondly, the structure is comic, presenting a conflict or imbalance that eventually ends in resolution. This comic structure corresponds to Tolkien's concept of *eucatastrophe*, discussed in his essay "On Fairy-Stories", which also denotes an emotional response to the comic structure (similar in effect to Aristotle's notion of catharsis).<sup>242</sup> This emotional response is the third fundamental way in which works of fantasy resemble Tolkien's work. Eucatastrophe is marked by a sense of wonder, an estrangement of the world, but, as Attebery notes, "rather than making familiar objects seem disconcerting or alien", as is the point of Viktor Shklovsky's concept of *ostranenie* or Brecht's *Verfremdung*, Tolkien "thought fantasy could restore them to the vividness with which we first saw them."<sup>243</sup> It seems an undisputable fact that a certain kind of fantastic narrative coalesces as the market

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<sup>240</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: where old and new media collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), Chapter 1

<sup>241</sup> Attebery, 1992, p 14

<sup>242</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Monster and the Critics, and other Essays* (London: HarperCollins, 2006 (1983)), p 153

<sup>243</sup> Attebery, 1992, p 16

category fantasy after Tolkien's commercial success in the mid-1960s. However, it is the manner in which Tolkien's work involves structural coupling that is of interest here, and this is not primarily a question of what texts mean to each other but rather what they do to each other, in a given historical environment. Through the influence of Tolkien's work, as mapped throughout the chapter, it is accordingly argued that participatory genres function as media ecologies.<sup>244</sup>

Likewise, it will be argued that fan participation hinges on the operationally ajar closure of ecosystems.<sup>245</sup> In an article on Peter Jackson's 2001 cinematic adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*, Dimitra Fimi notes that while Tolkien's narratives are firmly based on the notion of folklore as cultural memory, they have also, ever since their publication, been "a source of generating folklore."<sup>246</sup> Fimi traces how Jackson uses contemporary folklore primarily based on horror films, tapping into what Fimi calls a "global cinematic folklore", which in turn implies a collaborative relation between fan community and filmmakers. Thus the participatory practices salient in folklore and fan communities seem to be an integral part of the circulation and adaptation of Tolkien's work. In fact, it seems integral to the whole genre of fantasy. Fimi ends her discussion by noting: "the folklore of audiences,' which seems to be a natural phenomenon when a film reaches cult status, has an even better chance to emerge in adaptations of fantasy literature, as fantasy is one of the best-selling genres in the publishing world and habitually generates fan activity from a dedicated readership."<sup>247</sup> Approaching Tolkien's work as a media ecology will elucidate the relation between the fantastic and participatory culture as well as resituating the function of genre.

Some additional notes on the textual status of Tolkien's work are called for. The following chapter will deal with works published by J. R. R. Tolkien during his lifetime, as well as with posthumously published material. The posthumously published material has for the most part been edited by Tolkien's son, Christopher Tolkien; it comprises material pertaining to his secondary world Middle-earth as well as material unrelated to Middle-earth, mostly scholarly editions, and translations and adaptations of traditional myths and legends. This material has been continuously edited and published ever since Tolkien's death in 1973. The latest addition to the

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<sup>244</sup> An ecological understanding of genre is also implied, albeit not developed, by Attebery's fuzzy-set theory of genre, which he proposes as a framework for describing how a dynamic genre functions. The fuzzy-set theory is a concept Attebery borrows from logics, as a "more flexible means of categorization", where a given set – a certain number of texts comprising a genre – is "defined not by boundaries but by a center." Ibid., p 12

<sup>245</sup> Ian Bogost mentions Tolkien's work and its relation to fan-generated materials as an example of a unit operation. Bogost, 2012, p 28

<sup>246</sup> Dimitra Fimi, "Filming Folklore: Adapting Fantasy for the Big Screen through Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*", in *Picturing Tolkien*, Janice M. Bogstad & Philip E. Kaveny (ed.) (Jefferson, NC, McFarland & Co, 2011), p 85

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., p 98



posthumous publication, *The Lay of Atrou and Itrou*, a retelling of material from Celtic mythology, was published in 2016. Material relating to Middle-earth, referred to within the research community as the *Legendarium*; a large amount of encyclopedic information – legends, poems, genealogies, historiographies, geographies, fictive languages, and so forth – that Tolkien had compiled since the early 1910s and kept adding to all through his life, has been published in several editions, starting with *The Silmarillion* in 1977. However, with *The History of Middle-earth*, published in twelve volumes between 1983 and 1996, and edited by Christopher Tolkien, a final and definitive publication of the *Legendarium* has been presented, collecting what appears to be the total sum of material pertaining to Middle-earth, at least to be found among the objects deposited in Tolkien’s archive on his death. The publication, in different editions during Tolkien’s lifetime as well as posthumously, of variant texts – as will be highlighted in the following – has accordingly had the effect of establishing Tolkien’s work as a fluid text, affecting and being affected by the cultural and historical environment in which it emerges.<sup>248</sup> Christopher Tolkien comments, in the introduction to the first volume of *The History of Middle-earth*: “The Study of Middle-earth and Valinor is thus complex; for the object of the study was not stable, but exists, as it were ‘longitudinally’ in time (the author’s lifetime), and not only ‘transversely’ in time, as a printed text that undergoes no essential further change.”<sup>249</sup> There is a tension here between the presentation of Tolkien’s work as a coherent body of text, in the form of a history, and the multiple material versions comprising such a history. It is a tension that corresponds to the tension between archive and ecology discussed in the previous chapter. It is also this tension that Tolkien plays on in the foreword, when presenting *The Lord of The Rings* as a collation and translation of material found in the archives of Gondor, and of the fictional *Red Book of West-march*, in which the protagonists of the narrative have documented their adventures. This tension will surge up now and again during the investigation. To this extent, mapping the media ecology of Middle-earth also becomes a matter of tracing the power of the archon.

One last note. The following chapter will be using the collector’s edition of *The*

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<sup>248</sup> Theorizing textual fluidity, John Bryant notes: “Whereas criticism currently takes a text to be a meaning constructed from a given, singularized inscription; fluid-text analysis constructs meaning out of the evolutionary ‘spaces’ between historically sequenced inscriptions. The concern is not that ‘text’ in its largest sense is both material object and immaterial discourse, for traditional and fluid-text theorists share this fundamental understanding, but that fluid-text analysis extends notions of materiality and immateriality to include that dimension of rhetorical instability inherent in the revision process and the immaterial distance a writer and culture travel together in getting from one material version to the next.” John Bryant, “Witness and Access: The Uses of the Fluid Text”, in *Textual Cultures*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Spring, 2007), p 19

<sup>249</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, Christopher Tolkien, *The Book of Lost Tales, Part One* (London: HarperCollins, 2002 (1983)), p 7

*Lord of The Rings* published by HarperCollins in 2013, which uses the reset and revised edition of 2002. Page references to the three volumes of *The Lord of The Rings* will be made in the text.

## Foreword: paperback Tolkien and popular publishing

If the emergence of fantasy as a popular genre in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is intricately intertwined with the work of J. R. R. Tolkien, it is equally intertwined with the emergence of the paperback as a new popular book medium in the early 1960s. Following the American publication in paperback of *The Lord of the Rings* in 1965, fantasy surfaces as a new marketing category, with a subsequent impetus to formulate a legitimatizing generic history. This should not, however, be taken as an indication that Tolkien is the originator of fantasy, or that his work is to be understood as the origin of the genre. Rather, it will be argued that Tolkien's place at the heart of fantasy – theoretically as well as historically – is related to the ease with which his work seems to form structural couplings with new media systems.



Figure 16: The ACE unauthorized edition of *The Lord of the Rings* (1965)<sup>250</sup>

In 1965, a first, unauthorized paperback edition of *The Lord of the Rings* was published in the United States by ACE books (Figure 16), shortly followed, in the same year, by an authorized paperback edition of the trilogy by Ballantine books (Figure 17).<sup>251</sup> The sales of Tolkien's books prior to the two paperback editions had been fair but moderate. Since its first publication in 1937, *The Hobbit* had been printed both in the UK and in the United States, and a second edition, revised in order to align the story to the forthcoming *Lord of The Rings* trilogy, was published in 1951.

<sup>250</sup> Images from Tolkien Collector's Guide:

[www.tolkienguide.com/modules/wiwimod/index.php?page=LOTR+US+Paperbacks](http://www.tolkienguide.com/modules/wiwimod/index.php?page=LOTR+US+Paperbacks)

<sup>251</sup> Wayne G. Hammond, Douglas A. Anderson, *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Winchester: St. Paul's Bibliographies, 1993), p 104

In 1954, George Allen & Unwin published *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers* in the UK, with *The Return of the King* following in 1955. The trilogy saw American publication by Houghton Mifflin, who published one book each year from 1954 to 1956, using sheets provided by Allen & Unwin. Subsequent impressions of the first edition were numerous over the following decade – *The Fellowship of the Ring* was reprinted sixteen times, *The Two Towers* twelve times and *The Return of the King* eleven times – resulting in about 70, 000 copies of each book, counting both sides of the Atlantic.



Figure 17: The authorized Ballantine edition of *The Lord of the Rings* (1965)<sup>252</sup>

The unauthorized American ACE edition alone printed 150, 000 copies of each book in the trilogy, prior to being forced to cease publication and pay royalties for the copies printed. The exact sales figures of the Ballantine paperback are not known, but its first printing in October 1966 consisted of 125, 000 copies of each volume in the United States alone, and by March 1973 it had been reprinted forty times.<sup>253</sup> Thus the American success of Tolkien in the mid-1960s partly coincides with new reading practices in the wake of the emergent paperback book, where the high quality printing, artwork and design initiated by Allan Lane and Penguin, and largely overtaken by American publishers, bring together the mass-market industry of pulp fiction with high-end quality publishing. As a medium, the paperback occupied a liminal position, combining literary culture with popular press. The books of J. R. R. Tolkien, and particularly *The Lord of the Rings*, occupied a similar liminal position. Where *The Hobbit* had been published as a book for children, a traditional, albeit original, expression of British children's fantasy, the trilogy had clearly posed problems of categorization, forcing reviewers to attest to its narrative force while questioning its

<sup>252</sup> Images from Tolkien Collector's Guide:

[www.tolkienguide.com/modules/wiwimod/index.php?page=LOTR+US+Paperbacks](http://www.tolkienguide.com/modules/wiwimod/index.php?page=LOTR+US+Paperbacks)

<sup>253</sup> Hammond, Anderson, 1993, p 106, p 118

status as literature. Travelling from the book medium of traditional publishing to the popular medium of the paperback, this generic ambiguity is materially framed in the mass-market editions of Ballantine and ACE. The lurid illustrations common to American paperbacks worked well with the visual appeal of Tolkien's work in particular, and fantasy in general.<sup>254</sup> Furthermore, Tolkien's work, having been in print for more than ten years, fitted the profile of paperback reissues. Thus on several accounts the paperback editions of *The Lord of the Rings* aligned with the new medium of the paperback, while being able to benefit from a reading practice whose material circumstances marked it as in opposition to the dominant notion of literature. In the United States, the paperback had established itself in the 1960s as an increasingly important medium for young readers and for the development of young adult books, its mass-market format allowing for purchase by its readers, rather than by adults.<sup>255</sup>

The paperback success of *The Lord of the Rings* sparked a broader interest in Tolkien's work, creating a public demand for similar stories of heroic fantasy. Ballantine books, which had been publishing speculative fiction – primarily science fiction – in paperback since the 1950s, although never using fantasy as a generic label, recognized an emerging market, and reissued work that fitted the new emerging genre but had not previously been published as fantasy, thus establishing the outline of a generic history. The Ballantine Adult fantasy series, edited by Lin Carter and inaugurated in 1969, was furthermore instrumental in establishing fantasy as a marketing category. Soon new material was being written under the label fantasy, and by the late 1970s and early 1980s – in convergence with other popular media, established as well as emergent – the fantasy book boomed.

### **Prologue: monsters against allegory**

In the foreword to the second edition of *The Fellowship of the Ring* – written in part to motivate a second edition and thus strengthen copyrights on the American market – Tolkien takes a clear stand against an allegorical or topical interpretation of the trilogy. “As for any inner meaning or ‘message,’ it [the trilogy] has in the intention of the author none. It is neither allegorical nor topical.” (xxi) This statement, often discussed within Tolkien studies, is of particular interest both for the present discussion of distributed cognition and for the relation between hermeneutics and the fantastic. While the passage could be read as an attempt to salvage his work from reductive, and to his mind unfair, interpretations – and to some degree it is – it nevertheless

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<sup>254</sup> Beth Luey, “The Organization of the Book Publishing Industry”, in David Paul Nord, Joan Shelley Rubin, and Michael Schudson (eds.), *A History of the Book in America 5: The Enduring Book* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), p 44

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, p 36

deserves to be taken at face value. In support against topical and allegorical interpretations, Tolkien offers as argument a brief sketch of how the history of Middle-earth would have unrolled if these interpretations had merit.

The real war does not resemble the legendary war in its process or its conclusion. If it had inspired or directed the development of the legend, then certainly the Ring would have been seized and used against Sauron; he would not have been annihilated but enslaved, and Barad-dûr would not have been destroyed but occupied. Saruman, failing to get possession of the Ring, would in the confusion and treacheries of the time have found in Mordor the missing links in his own researches into Ring-lore, and before long he would have made a Great Ring of his own with which to challenge the self-styled Ruler of Middle-earth. In that conflict both sides would have held hobbits in hatred and contempt: they would not long have survived even as slaves. (xxi)

Whether his argument is convincing or not is not the question here – certainly allegories are not merely a matter of direct correspondence between two planes of meaning; after more than half a century, the critical reception indicates a more complex, and to the present investigation more pertinent, propensity to Tolkien's work. Clearly – no matter what Tolkien states in his foreword – it provokes allegorical readings. But at the same time, and by the same token, Tolkien's writings on Middle-earth refuse allegory. To this extent, Tolkien's work is, in Jaime Alazraki's sense of the word, neo-fantastic. However, unlike Alazraki's predominantly narratological and semiotic understanding of the neo-fantastic, the continual and simultaneous lure and refusal of allegory in Tolkien's work is not so much a question of hermeneutical as of ontological liminality; it is part of how it articulates as a distributed subjectivity; it is indicative of the sympoiesis of the media ecology of Middle-earth.

Thus the brief alternate version of *The Lord of the Rings* sketched by Tolkien in his foreword is not to be taken as an argument against the validity of a certain topical or allegorical interpretation; rather, it is an indication of the *virtual* validity of alternate versions. In a radical sense, by sketching the outline of this alternate version, Tolkien posits *The Lord of the Rings* as a configurative text: not only is there no “inner meaning” or “message” hidden in the text; there does not – in a very real, material sense – exist a single, authoritative text. Instead, *The Lord of the Rings* is, at the very outset, a configurative textuality, necessarily submitted to media-ecological sympoiesis. And the very ease by which the foreword generates a synopsis to an alternate-world fan-fiction testifies to this. As this chapter will prove.

The configurative textuality of Tolkien's work is intricately tied to the function of monsters. In his Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture on Beowulf, *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*, read to the British Academy on 25 November 1936, Tolkien

argues against interpreting the monsters of the poem – Grendel and the dragon – as Christian allegories. Nor is the poem a historical chronicle documenting the transition from heathendom to Christianity in Britain.<sup>256</sup>

Neither should the monstrosity of the monsters be seen as an aesthetic flaw, derivative and grotesque in comparison to the sublime monsters of classical mythology; “the significance of a myth is not easy to be pinned on by analytical reasoning” Tolkien states, and continues: “It is at its best when it is presented by a poet who feels rather than makes explicit what his theme portends; who presents it incarnate in the world of history and geography, as our poet has done.”<sup>257</sup> The monsters of *Beowulf* are the point at which myth becomes incarnate: being grounded in traditional tales of monsters they nevertheless constitute a new and measured reformulation of tradition. They are monstrously opaque, while at the same time conforming to the given form of a preexisting mythology. Tolkien points to the significance of the materiality of the monster, to its reluctance to comply with a given system of meaning, while simultaneously taking part in that very same system. In the case of *Beowulf* this is an indication of how the poem is part of a larger set of texts, intertwined in a cultural practice, where the discrepancies and incomprehensible aspects of the monsters constitute a situated experience.<sup>258</sup> Rather than complying with a given system, the monsters provoke a reformulation of the system of which they are part. The monsters of *Beowulf* – and of *Middle-earth* – trace the sympoiesis of a configurative textuality.

## Secondary belief and faërian drama

Retaining the presence of a configurative sympoiesis is central to Tolkien’s approach to creativity and to the aesthetics and media ecology of Middle-earth. It is by participating in the configuration of the narrative, acknowledging and giving in to an event of sympoiesis, that the “secondary belief” of fantasy is achieved. Fantasy, Tolkien argues in “On Fairy-Stories”, his most quoted, but as Tom Shippey rightly notes, quite probably his least convincing essay<sup>259</sup>, is distinguished primarily by establishing a “Secondary world” into which the mind of the reader may enter, holding what is related as truth in accordance to the laws of that world: “You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside.”<sup>260</sup> This is art as sub-creation, creativity within a given system, making this system new again, recreating the world. On the surface, the

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<sup>256</sup> Tolkien, 2006 (1983), p 20

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., p 15

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., p 31

<sup>259</sup> Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth* (London: HarperCollins, rev. ed. 2005), p 56

<sup>260</sup> Tolkien, 2006 (1983), p 132



sub-creator of fantasy largely seems to correspond to the modern authorial function. However, in the discussion of the secondary belief necessary to successful fantasy art, there are indications – the argument in “On Fairy-Stories” is ambiguous – that support an understanding of sub-creation as a participatory and communal event. It is this aspect of Tolkien’s theory of sub-creation that is highlighted when approaching his work as constituting a media ecology: creative agency is grounded here in a distributed subjectivity, where a number of distinctions central to a modernist, liberal humanist notion of literature are put into question.

As opposed to the notion of the willing suspension of disbelief, secondary belief does not seem to allow the reality of the secondary world to be doubted, whether willingly or unwillingly. It is a game whose rules are not to be played with, but rather, it would seem, constitutes the player. Tolkien compares secondary belief to the enthusiasm experienced by a sports fan: “A real enthusiast for cricket is in the enchanted state: Secondary Belief. I when I watch a match, am in the lower level. I can achieve (more or less) willing suspension of disbelief, when I am held there and supported by some other motive that will keep away boredom: for instance, a wild heraldic preference for dark blue rather than light.”<sup>261</sup> The precise distinction between secondary belief and the willing suspension of disbelief is not particularly clear, and herein lies the unconvincing side to his argument. However, secondary belief does seem to be a central part of his conception of fantasy, consisting of an elevated, intense and heightened experience, verging on rapture; whereas the willing suspension of disbelief is described as “a substitute for the genuine thing, a subterfuge we use when condescending to games or make-believe”<sup>262</sup>. In “On Fairy-Stories” Tolkien claims that secondary belief is primarily achieved as a narrative art: “In human art Fantasy is a thing best left to words, to true literature.”<sup>263</sup> However, he does also – playfully and much to the dismay of some critics<sup>264</sup> – posit an “elven art” a “Faërian Drama” that “can produce Fantasy with a realism and immediacy beyond the compass of any human mechanism.”<sup>265</sup> This elven art produces enchantment and goes beyond secondary belief, generating the sense of corporeally being part of the secondary world. While the immersion of the Faërian Drama threatens with forgetfulness and dissolution of the self (“in Faërian Drama you are in a dream that some other mind is weaving, and the knowledge of that alarming fact may slip from your grasp”<sup>266</sup>), it does not seek to overthrow or intrude upon the integrity of the reader.

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid., p 132

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., p 132

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., p 140

<sup>264</sup> Tom Shippey, 2005, p xx

<sup>265</sup> Tolkien, 2006 (1983), 142

<sup>266</sup> Ibid., p 142



It is art, and as such, secondary belief is its highest achievement; but it is still – or at least this is what Tolkien is claiming – an art of disinterested contemplation, leaving the subject intact. This innate threat of immersion does, however, pose a pertinent question as to the subjectivity entailed in secondary belief. As correlate to the enchanting but disinterested contemplation of art, Tolkien poses Magic: “Enchantment produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside; but in its purity it is artistic in desire and purpose. Magic produces, or pretends to produce, an alteration in the Primary World.” As opposed to the benevolent and seemingly unobtrusiveness of art, magic is “but a technique; its desire is *power* in this world, domination of things and wills.”<sup>267</sup> Clearly, Tolkien’s definition of fantasy as secondary belief here entails an understanding of participation and immersion that threatens the notion of an autonomous subjectivity. The notion of an autonomous art, however much Tolkien seems willing to retain its moral disinterestedness, becomes untenable. Either the elven art of secondary belief, an art so impure it threatens enrapture in another’s dream, is not art at all; or an altogether different notion of art is employed. And magic is, as Tolkien has stated earlier in the essay, an integral part of fantasy; in fact, it is the only part that must be taken seriously.<sup>268</sup> However much Tolkien wishes to limit secondary belief to the realm of pure art, it nevertheless seems to entail employing techniques in the “dominations of things and wills.”

Secondary belief is closely tied here to a specific notion of language, whereby language is “incarnate in the world of history and geography”, as previously noted. Language is accordingly understood as a situated experience, immersed in an act of enunciation, rather than as a preexisting system – it is language as *parole* and not as *langue* that establishes secondary belief. Secondary belief thus emerges as an axiomatic event, where a new configurative version of the secondary world becomes the only possible version. It is therefore misguided to treat similarities in motive and plot as expressions of the same story; instead, one must be attentive to the “atmosphere, the unclassifiable individual details of a story” in order to properly ascertain how it enables sub-creation.<sup>269</sup>

It is tempting to read “On Fairy-Stories” as an attempt to legitimize fantasy as a literary mode of storytelling, characterized by an artistic sensibility and originality on a par with that of the – at the time – preferred literary modes of realism. And to some extent, this is where the argument is heading – if it were not for the mon-

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid., p 143

<sup>268</sup> “Faërie itself may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic – but it is a magic of a peculiar mood and power, at the furthest pole from the vulgar devices of the laborious, scientific magician. There is one proviso: if there is any satire present in the tale, one thing must not be made fun of, the magic itself”, Ibid., p 114

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., p 120

sters. Tolkien's insistence on treating the monsters – Grendel and the dragon – as singular expressions, mute and excommunicated in their monstrosity, a naked presence in stark opposition against interpretation and allegory, purports a notion of art and literature that takes the materiality of the object into serious consideration. The monsters are at the same time part of a traditional mythology, a communal system of meaning while still retaining a trace of radical exteriority to the system. The monsters of Middle-earth oscillate – as do Grendel and the dragon – between transparency and opacity, swerving incessantly through names and things. This is where the impetus to allegory is found, but it is also where allegory is denied.

Brian Attebery has noted that the fantastic hinges on both the radical open-endedness of language – its ability to paratactically construct unending lists may well be the only proper way to verbally describe worlds that do not exist – as well as the iconicity of signs, whereby the articulation of a semiotic unit resembles its referent.<sup>270</sup> The fantastic, Attebery argues, is full of impossible and contradictory images, whose combination “into a narrative order is an attempt to achieve iconic representations, so that the narrative can, like the city map, give us new insight into the phenomena it makes reference to.”<sup>271</sup> It could certainly be argued – as it has been repeatedly throughout Western cultural history, not least by poststructuralist and deconstructive theories – that the tendency to totalize and idealize is an inevitable effect of the function of language and a certain mode of thinking in compliance with that function. However, an ecological approach to the function of language and to thinking offers an opportunity to think totalities – these monstrous objects eternally exterior to language and thought – without totalizing. This is, in fact, what Tolkien's monsters insist on, that they be treated within the environment of a media ecology. The monsters of Middle-earth insist that secondary belief and sub-creation emerge as an immanent event in the distributed cognition of subjectivity as ecology. As such, the monsters operate by the machinic phylum not as “a whole”, as Fuller points out, but as “a live torrent in time of variegated and combinatorial energy and matter.”<sup>272</sup>

Secondary belief comes to pass by virtue of an act of distributed agency and cognition. Volition is an integrated part of the game of the fantastic, not from an external position allowing the “willing suspension of disbelief”, essentially keeping a disinterested distance from the work of art, but from within the environment of an ecology, and in this particular case, the media ecology of Middle-earth. This is Faërian Drama. This is the secret of monsters.

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<sup>270</sup> Brian Attebery, 1992, p 6

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, p 7

<sup>272</sup> Fuller, 2005, p 173

## 1. On the names of Blue Wizards

In a much-discussed scene in Peter Jackson's adaptation of *The Hobbit* from 2012, Gandalf, played by actor Ian McKellen, notes – in passing – that the Order of Wizards of which he is part consists of five members: himself, Saruman the white, Radagast the Brown, and two blue wizards, whose names he has “quite forgotten” (Figure 18).<sup>273</sup> The main reason for this sudden amnesia – remarkable for a character who otherwise seems the quintessential epitome of hidden lore and ancient knowledge –



Figure 18: Fan-processed image from website *The Fellowship*, based on image from *The Hobbit* (2012), dir. Peter Jackson, <http://www.moddb.com/groups/lotr-fan-group/news/blue-wizards-of-middle-earth-article>

is that Peter Jackson lacks the copyright for the names of the two Blue Wizards.<sup>274</sup> He simply cannot use them in the film.

What might appear as purely anecdotal, a puerile comment on a procrastinated and infected conflict over copyright, is in fact indicative of how a large part of the work of J. R. R. Tolkien functions: it is an integral part of the aesthetics of the media ecology of Middle-earth, operating on the tension between archive and ecology discussed earlier.

The mythopoeic Middle-earth consists of vast numbers of disparate objects: texts, legends, songs, fragments, cultural artifacts. From this mythopoeic mesh, a certain number of narratives are configured, some by Tolkien himself, some by his son Christopher, some official, some unofficial. Role-playing games, computer games, merchandise, and fan-fiction are produced by and within the media ecology of Middle-earth.

Where, then, do the names of the Blue Wizards surface, if not in Gandalf's memory? There is no mention of them in *The Hobbit*. However, it is important to note that there exist several versions of *The Hobbit*. During his work with *The Lord of the Rings* in the 1940s, Tolkien revised *The Hobbit* to align the narration to the sequel, most notably changing Bilbo's obtaining the Ring in Chapter 5 as a birthday gift on Gollum's part in the first edition into the haphazard discovery in the dark of later editions. Thus when Frodo refers, in *The Lord of the Rings*, to having been told the

<sup>273</sup> The matter of the Blue wizards, as the following section will indicate, has been discussed at some length within Tolkien fandom. A recent summation is found at the website “The Fellowship”: <http://www.moddb.com/groups/lotr-fan-group/news/blue-wizards-of-middle-earth-article>, from which also the image of Gandalf (Figure 18) is taken.

<sup>274</sup> Peter Jackson, “Commentary”, in the extended version *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (2012)

real account of Bilbo's meeting with Gollum, and not the "other tale", he is in a sense referring to the first edition of *The Hobbit*, and to a version of events unbeknown to most readers.<sup>275</sup> The changes made to *The Hobbit* in the second edition of 1951 also considerably increased the historical and geographical scope of the narrative, fleshing it out with a sense of background. This sense of background – referred to by Dimitra Fimi as the "pseudo-historical depth" of Middle-earth<sup>276</sup> – draws on the *Legendarium*. Parts of the *Legendarium* were published in the Appendices to *The Return of the King*, and its central narrative was posthumously published in 1977 as *The Silmarillion*, edited by Tolkien's son Christopher and would-be fantasy writer Guy Gavriel Kay. More material from the *Legendarium* followed in *Unfinished Tales* in 1982 and *The Children of Húrin* in 2008, both volumes edited by Christopher Tolkien and both consisting of fairly delineated narratives. Parallel to the publication of these books, considered by the publishing industry and research community as in fact *written* by J. R. R. Tolkien with the intention of publication – albeit edited by his son – Christopher Tolkien also published the *Legendarium* in twelve volumes gathered under the title *The History of Middle-earth*. *The History of Middle-earth* collects in a critical edition the total of J. R. R. Tolkien's previously unpublished corpus pertaining to Middle-earth, from the earliest versions of "The Silmarillion"<sup>277</sup> and onward.

Clear traces of creative collaboration are discernable throughout Tolkien's literary production. *The Lord of the Rings* is commissioned by publisher Stanley Unwin as a sequel to *The Hobbit*. However, rather than forming a continuation of the earlier book, *The Lord of the Rings* precipitates the re-configuration of *The Hobbit*. In a letter to his publisher on February 24, 1950, after finally finishing a first manuscript draft, Tolkien expresses his grievances at the result, stating that he has "produced a monster: an immensely long, complex, rather bitter, and very terrifying romance, quite unfit for children (if fit for anybody)" concluding that the result is "not really a sequel to *The Hobbit*, but to 'The Silmarillion'"; in fact "The Silmarillion" has "bubbled up, infiltrated, and probably spoiled everything (that even remotely approached 'Faery') which I have tried to write since."<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Douglas A. Anderson comments in *The Annotated Hobbit*: "The first edition of *The Hobbit* (1937) contains a significantly different version of this chapter. As Tolkien wrote the sequel, *The Lord of the Rings*, he found it necessary to revise *The Hobbit* in order to bring it in line with the sequel. The portrayal of Gollum has been substantially altered; in the first edition he is not nearly as wretched a creature. And the stakes of riddle contest are slightly different: It was still Bilbo's life if he lost, but if he won, Gollum would give him a present.", J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), p 128n

<sup>276</sup> Dimitra Fimi, *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009)

<sup>277</sup> Within Tolkien studies, using "The Silmarillion" in quotes refers to the different versions of Tolkien's account of events taking place prior to *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* published in *The History of Middle-earth*, while in italics *The Silmarillion* refers to the 1977 book, narrating these events. This practice is also applied here.

<sup>278</sup> Humphrey Carpenter (ed.), *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000 (1995, 1981)), p 136

The genesis of *The Hobbit* is an often-repeated story within Tolkien studies. Humphrey Carpenter describes the event as an epiphany, a missing piece suddenly falling into place. During the 1920s, says Humphrey, Tolkien had been engaged in two types of fictional writing, on the one side he had been writing stories for “mere amusement, often specifically for children”; and on the other side he had been trying, and failing, to construct, following Elias Lönnrot’s *Kalevala*, a mythology for England.<sup>279</sup> In a letter responding to W H Auden, who in preparation for a talk on BBC had asked for some background to the creative process, Tolkien writes:

All I remember about the start of *The Hobbit* is sitting correcting School Certificate papers in the everlasting weariness of that annual task forced on impecunious academics with children. On a blank leaf I scrawled: ‘In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.’ I did not and do not know why. I did nothing about it, for a long time, and for some years I got no further than the production of Thrór’s Map. But it became *The Hobbit* in the early 1930s, and was eventually published not because of my own children’s enthusiasm (though they liked it well enough), but because I lent it to the then Rev. Mother of Cherwell Edge when she had flu, and it was seen by a former student who was at the time in the office of Allen and Unwin.<sup>280</sup>

Certainly Tolkien writes this being well aware that Auden will quote him on the BBC, but to some extent the contingency described, both concerning the actual invention of subterranean hobbits and the manner in which the story came to be published, is corroborated by the vast material Christopher Tolkien has organized in the twelve volumes of *The History of Middle-earth*. Much of this material consists of disparate notes and scribbles concerning the *Legendarium*, apparently left undeveloped. Although, as already noted, it is not until Tolkien has written the sequel that *The Hobbit*, as an effect of the amendments made in its second edition and in accord with the additional material published in the Appendices, is clearly linked to the mythology of the *Legendarium*. Perhaps the most significant change in the second edition of *The Hobbit* is the role of the Ring. From being an ordinary object in the first edition, property to be traded as stakes in a game of riddles by a conflicted but essentially autonomous – “and we doesn’t answer, we gives it a present, we give it a present, gollum!”<sup>281</sup> – it has in the second, and following editions, become “the Precious”<sup>282</sup>,

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<sup>279</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, *Tolkien: a Biography*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), p 243, p 129 (in ebook)

<sup>280</sup> Carpenter, 2000, p 215

<sup>281</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, Douglas A. Anderson, *The Annotated Hobbit*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), p 121n11

<sup>282</sup> Douglas Anderson writes, in the *Annotated Hobbit*: “In the first edition of *The Hobbit* (1937), Gollum uses the phrase ‘my precious’ to refer only to himself. In the second edition (1951), in which Gollum’s role was significantly altered, the phrase might be taken to refer to the ring, as is often the case in *The Lord of the Rings*.” *Ibid.*, note 8, p 120

coexistent with the identity of Sméagol/Gollum. These changes to the narrative, as mentioned, are precipitated by the writing of *The Lord of the Rings*, a process that comes to pass in an act of collective creativity, in which Tolkien as a writer is clearly only one – albeit perhaps the most important – part of a distribution of agencies.<sup>283</sup> Conferring the ring agency changes the identity of Gollum, making him too a collective. With the third edition in 1966, further changes to Gollum’s physique are introduced. Due to the many different illustrations accompanying translations of *The Hobbit* where Gollum is depicted as a large creature (Figure 19), Tolkien felt it necessary to point out, throughout Chapter 5, that Gollum is in fact “a small slimy creature.”<sup>284</sup>



Figure 19: Illustrations of Bilbo’s encounter with Gollum from the first two Swedish editions of the *Hobbit*, by Torbjörn Zetterholm (left) from *Hompen: en resa dit och tillbaks igen* (1947, trans. Tore Zetterholm) and Tove Jansson (right) from *Bilbo: en hobbits äventyr* (1962, trans. Britt G. Hallqvist)

Tolkien frequently refers to his creative process as succumbing to the inherent logic of the systems he has been constructing, whether mythopoeic or linguistic. This is, of course, somewhat of a romantic cliché about creativity; however, Tolkien’s method, as commented on in letters and traceable throughout his writing, supports an un-

<sup>283</sup> In a discussion of the development of the *Legendarium*, and of Tolkien’s attempts at aligning the different narratives, Elizabeth A. Wittingham notes: “after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien worked to make his mythology consistent with the newer work, but something more also seems to have motivated him. The other new element in his life at that time was the letters, hundreds of letters from fans, friends, and family. They asked him a wide variety of questions about his books and the world he had created, and some of them he could not answer. When he did not know the colors or names of the other wizards, he said so, but later he, too, was curious, and he had to find the answer.” Elizabeth A. Wittingham, *The Evolution of Tolkien’s Mythology, a Study of the History of Middle-earth* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2008), p 168

<sup>284</sup> The 1937 edition reads: “lived old Gollum. I don’t know where”, while the 1966 edition has: “lived old Gollum, a small slimy creature. I don’t know where.” Douglas A. Anderson notes: “The revision was probably made in response to the illustrated foreign editions of *The Hobbit* that had appeared before 1966. In most of these, Gollum is depicted as a very large creature. In the 1947 Swedish edition, he is drawn as a large, dark rock about four times the size of Bilbo, and in the 1957 German edition he is several times larger than Bilbo (his legs, dangling over his boat, are themselves longer than Bilbo is tall.)” *Ibid.*, p 118



derstanding of the process as grounded in an environment of distributed agencies. Perhaps most famous is Tolkien's notion, a notion partly grounded in the practice of philology, that the secondary world of Middle-earth is made necessary by the languages he had invented, and not the other way around: "The invention of the languages is the foundation", Tolkien writes in a letter used by his American publisher for publicity after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, and continues "The 'stories' were made rather to provide a world for languages than the reverse. To me, a name comes first and the story follows."<sup>285</sup> His principal depository for names and languages was "The Silmarillion", an early manuscript version of which had been presented to Stanley Unwin in 1937. It was turned down, with the recommendation to treat it as a "work to be drawn upon rather than published."<sup>286</sup> And to a large degree, this seems exactly to be how Tolkien had treated it all along.

The names of the two Blue Wizards, however, are not to be found in *The Silmarillion* either. The question of their identity is first raised by a passage in *The Two Towers* when Saruman, after having been defeated at Isengard by the Ents in the subsequent altercation with Gandalf, mentions in passing "the rods of The Five Wizards" (583). Further information is given in Appendix B of *The Return of the King*, relating how an order of wizards – of *Istari* – appeared in Middle-earth to aid in the struggle against Sauron: "The two highest of this order (of whom it is said there were five) were called by the Eldar Curunir, 'the Man of Skill', and Mithrandir, 'the Grey Pilgrim', but by Men in the North Saruman and Galdalf." (1085) With Radagast the Brown appearing in the first book, the existence of two hitherto unnamed and colorless wizards is inferred.

In a letter to Rhona Beare dated 14 October 1958, in answer to an array of questions pertaining to the *Legendarium*, Tolkien addresses the omission of names and colors, stating: "I have not named the colours, because I do not know them."<sup>287</sup> However in a text published in *Unfinished Tales*, with the title "the essay on the Istari", presumably written in 1954 the two unnamed wizards are mentioned by color, after establishing that the order was headed by five chiefs arriving in Middle-earth from the "Uttermost West":<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> Carpenter, 2000, p 219

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, p 136 There is, however, some uncertainty as to which manuscript the reader commissioned by Unwin actually did read. Tolkien had submitted both a prose and a verse version of a central part of the narrative comprising "The Silmarillion", and the reader had expressed himself favorably on the prose part, but less so concerning the verse version. *Ibid.*, p 25

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, p 280

<sup>288</sup> Christopher Tolkien notes in his commentary that the essay was initially detailed in the unpublished index to *The Return of the King*, and would thus have been written, or at least outlined at that time. J. R. R. Tolkien, Christopher Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), p 17-18



The first to come was one of noble mien and bearing, with raven hair, and a fair voice, and he was clad in white; great skill he had in works of hand, and he was regarded by well-nigh all, even by the Eldar, as the head of the Order. Others there were also: two clad in sea-blue, and one in earthen brown; and last came one who seemed the least, less tall than the others, and in looks more aged, grey-haired and grey-clad, and leaning on a staff.<sup>289</sup>

Thus there is here some notion of the identity of the two unmentioned wizards, and at least after the publication of *Unfinished Tales* they are well-known parts of the *Legendarium*, even if they remain nameless in the essay: “Of the Blue little was known in the West, and they had no names save *Ithryn Luin* ‘the Blue Wizards’”<sup>290</sup> Later on in *Unfinished Tales* Christopher Tolkien states, in his comments on “the essay on the Istarī”, that he has found a “page of jottings” among the “often illegible” material left by his father on the topic. In these jottings, he discerns the names of the two blue wizards: “The note ends with the statement that Curomo (Saruman) took Aiwendil (Radagast) because Yavanna begged him, and that Alatar took Pallando as a friend.”<sup>291</sup>

This was for a long time the final word on the identity of the Blue Wizards. However, in the twelfth volume of *The History of Middle-earth* published in 1996, Christopher Tolkien added new material. First, he comments on the quality of the source: “On the reverse of the page are some notes which I described in *Unfinished Tales* as uninterpretable, but which with longer scrutiny I have been largely able to make out.” He then continues to relate one of these notes, in a transcription of his father’s handwriting: “No names are recorded for the two wizards.”<sup>292</sup> But in yet another note “even rougher and more difficult” he finds the following:

The ‘other two’ came much earlier, at the same time probably as Glorfindel, when matters became very dangerous in the Second Age. Glorfindel was sent to aid Elrond and was (though not yet said) pre-eminent in the war with Eriador. But the other two Istarī were sent for a different purpose. Morinehtar and Rómestámo. Darkness-slayer and East-helper. Their task was to circumvent Saruon: to bring help to the few tribes of Men that had rebelled from Melkor-worship, to stir up rebellion...<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid., p 389

<sup>290</sup> Ibid., p 390

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., p 393

<sup>292</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, Christopher Tolkien, *The History of Middle-earth XII: The Peoples of Middle-earth* (London: HarperCollins, 2002 (1996)), p 384

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., p 385

This is perhaps the significance of the names of the two blue wizards: that they are variant. They are things – absent, nameless – suddenly become names. As such, their presence haunts the *Legendarium*.

Tom Shippey, who argues that philology is “the only proper guide to Middle-earth”<sup>294</sup> in accord with Tolkien’s intentions, discusses at length the importance of names in Tolkien’s work. Shippey claims that Tolkien’s notion of how the mythology evolves as a logical necessity from his invented languages could be understood against the 19<sup>th</sup>-century philological practice of hypostasizing and reconstructing languages, creating so-called asterisk realities.<sup>295</sup> An asterisk reality describes, as John William Houghton explains, “the tendency of philologists to reconstruct not only languages but also the world-views that those words and languages described”<sup>296</sup>. The names of Blue Wizards accordingly change everything. This is the secret of wizards. To this extent, the comment made by Gandalf in *The Hobbit* becomes a comment on how adaptation, and the ecological sympoiesis that adaptation implies, is an integral part of the aesthetics of Middle-earth.

The cinematic adaptation of *The Hobbit* was initially planned as two films, written by Peter Jackson, Fran Walsh, Philippa Boyens and Guillermo del Toro. Production began in 2007, with del Toro set to direct, and the films were planned to premiere in 2010 and 2011 respectively. However, in 2008 The Tolkien Trust together with Tolkien’s American publisher HarperCollins filed a lawsuit against New Line Cinema, claiming that the production company had failed to deliver royalties from the massively successful film trilogy *Lord of the Rings*. The Tolkien Trust demanded 7.5% restitution on the estimated 3 billion dollar revenue made by the *Lord of the Rings* film franchise. In September 2009 a settlement was made, allowing the production company to continue, as Christopher Tolkien stated, “its proposed films of *The Hobbit*.”<sup>297</sup> By then del Toro had left the production team, and after some negotiation the task for directing was taken over by Peter Jackson. The planned two-film project soon expanded into a trilogy.

Compared to Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, which in its extended version amounted to more than eleven hours of film, the idea of adapting *The Hobbit* as a trilogy might seem solely to be adhering to the commercial demands of the industry; and to a certain extent there are clearly passages in the three *The Hobbit* films in the franchise that function more as illustrations of the technological evolution of the film medium – such as the 3D high frame rate – or as ergodic material for accom-

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<sup>294</sup> Shippey, 2005, p 6

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, p 16

<sup>296</sup> John William Houghton, “Augustine in the cottage of lost play”, in Jane Chance (ed.), *Tolkien the Medievalist* (London: Routledge, 2003), p 171

<sup>297</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/8245300.stm>

panying computer games and similar merchandise. But there are also episodes, like the lengthy introduction giving the background of the kingdom of Erebor, Thorin's nickname Oakenshield and the animosity between Thorin and Azog the Defiler, that are based on material taken from the Appendices to *The Lord of the Rings*.

This is all in line with Jackson's earlier adaptation, where it is clear that the scriptwriters worked with the *Legendarium* in order to configure a narrative rather than merely transpose the chronology of the book trilogy into a cinematic format. Material from the appendices, pertaining to matters such as linguistics and geography, as well as actual episodes of narration, is integrated with the narrative of the film. Most salient, perhaps, is "The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen" from Appendix F. In the third film, this episode is embedded within the narrative as a prolepsis in which Arwen, played by Liv Tyler, experiences a vision of her future bereavement on Aragon's death, with the effect, as film critic Kristin Thomson notes, of undercutting "a happy ending to the Aragorn-Arwen romance."<sup>298</sup> It is also in Arwen's vision scene, added to the extended version of *The Return of the King*, that the elven character Figwit surfaces. Figwit started out as an unnamed role played by an extra and briefly featured at the council of Elrond in the first film. Within the fan community the figure got immediate attention, and was eventually named Figwit. Dimitra Fimi writes, in her discussion of folklore and fan culture in Jackson's film adaptation referred to earlier: "The name Figwit is the acronym of 'Frodo Is Great... Who Is That?' and came about because this particular extra appears in the shot directly after Frodo has offered to take the ring to Mordor with the memorable line 'I will take it'"<sup>299</sup> Figwit was intensely discussed within the fan community, on sites such as "Figwit Lives!"; and was subsequently incorporated with an accredited role into the narrative by the producers of *The Return of The King*, given a spoken line as well as a card in the card game *The Lord of the Rings Trading Card Game*. Fimi's point in her discussion on the adaptation is mainly to elucidate how fan culture, and fan fiction, is an integral part in the production of Jackson's films, and although she touches briefly on the larger, and perhaps more crucial, question of the function of participatory culture in relation to fantasy and the fantastic, and vice versa, she ultimately seems content with merely pointing to the empirical fact that they are connected.

The Figwit card was made for *The Lord of the Rings Trading Card Game*, produced by *Decipher*. This later game was based solely on the films and the *Lord of the Rings* books, and accordingly supports no cards depicting the Blue Wizards. In the

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<sup>298</sup> Thomson, Kristin, "Gollum talks to himself: Problems and Solutions in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*", in *Picturing Tolkien, Essays on Peter Jackson's The Lord of the Rings Film Trilogy*, (ed.) Janice M. Bogstad and Philip E. Kaveny (Jefferson, N. C.: McFarland & Company, 2011), p ?

<sup>299</sup> Fimi, 2011, p 97

*Middle-earth Collectible Card Game* from 1995, however, made under the license of ICE who also produced the *Middle-earth Roleplaying Game* from 1984 to 1999, both Blue Wizards are represented by cards. This is understandable, since ICE had used the two Blue Wizards in a campaign module for the role-playing game. In fact, *Lords of Middle-earth Vol. 1* published in 1986, contain the most comprehensive material pertaining to the *Ithryn Luin*, in the form of a brief narrative telling of their travels in eastern Middle-earth (Figure 20). The authors of the module inform the reader in the preface that they “hope to give the reader the thrust of the creative processes behind, and nature of, each character” but are also careful to point out to the reader that “of course, always remember that the ultimate sources of information are the works of professor J. R. R. Tolkien.”<sup>300</sup>



Figure 20: *Lords of Middle-earth* (1986), Alatar and Pallando

Nevertheless, as the names of the Blue wizards indicate, information in Tolkien’s work is clearly a matter of ecological embodiment. This also includes that which does not exist. In letter 180, dated 14 January 1956, and addressed to an “unidentified reader”, Tolkien describes how the events narrated in his books are already “more or less written” and continues: “There is hardly any reference in *The Lord of The Rings* to things that do not actually *exist* on its own plane (of secondary or sub-creational reality): sc. have been written.”<sup>301</sup> Here, Tolkien seems to be alluding to his notion of literary invention, whereby mythology and story, in the manner of a philological asterisk reality, are made necessary by the existence of words – or, more precisely, words without meaning, which in a sense equates to things – in the un-

<sup>300</sup> Peter C. Fenlon, Terry K. Amthor, R. Mark Colborn, *Lords of Middle-earth, volume 1* (Charlottesville: Iron Crown Enterprises, 1986), p 1

<sup>301</sup> Carpenter, 2000, p 231

derstanding of things represented by Jane Bennett – without names. In a footnote to letter 180, Tolkien comments on the things in his sub-creation that “do not actually exist”, concluding “The cats of Queen Berúthiel and the names and adventures of the other 2 wizards (5 minus Saruman, Gandalf, Radagast) are all that I recollect.”<sup>302</sup>

## 2. The mythic method

Perhaps like no other critic and theorist of the fantastic, Brian Attebery has endeavored to approach Tolkien’s work – and the kind of fantasy stories made popular through his work – using categories not pertaining to a modernist aesthetic. Early in the 1990s, when fantasy first called for academic attention, Attebery noted that most scholars up to that point had not been particularly interested in dealing with Tolkien per se but rather felt inclined to include him in their studies of the literary fantastic – if even that – by virtue of his undeniable popularity. Accordingly, Tolkien had for the most part been analyzed, Attebery pointed out, by using the same tools as those developed for modernist literature. Attebery quotes Burton Raffel’s essay “*The Lord of the Rings as Literature*”, in which Raffel states that the trilogy “is a magnificent performance, full of charm, excitement, and affection, but it is not – at least as I am here using the term – literature.”<sup>303</sup> Concerning style, characterization and incident, Tolkien’s books simply did not meet the criteria, Raffel claimed. Taking Raffel’s objections at face value, Attebery concluded that in order to properly investigate Tolkien’s work, “we must either redefine literature or exclude Tolkien – and with him much of modern fantasy.”<sup>304</sup> Turning to theories of postmodern aesthetics, and citing Tom Shippey’s philological studies as a non-metaphysical approach, *Strategies of Fantasy* sketches a trajectory towards such a redefinition of literature.

Attebery shows how a postmodernist notion of literature caters to the aesthetics of *The Lord of the Rings*. In particular, it is Tolkien’s emphasis on the ontogenetic power of storytelling and his playful handling of mythological material that aligns him to a postmodernist aesthetics, “Tolkien’s work is always metafictional”<sup>305</sup>, says Attebery. This does not imply, however, that Tolkien is a postmodernist writer. To this extent, *The Lord of the Rings* does not seek to question or problematize the notion of reality; it merely aims to establish the secondary world of Middle-earth as an act of sub-creation: “Hence, though both Tolkien and Postmodernists are interested in literary frames like the fairy tale’s ‘once upon a time’ or the mock-scholarly introduction,” writes Attebery, “Tolkien differs from Borges or Lem in that he avoids the

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<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, p 231

<sup>303</sup> Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbardo (eds), *Tolkien and the Critics: Essays on J. R. R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p 218

<sup>304</sup> Attebery, 1992, p 19

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, p 41

characteristically Postmodernist violation of that frame. He is interested in sustaining illusion, not violating it.<sup>306</sup>

As Attebery points out, Tolkien's work does not deliver a postmodernist critique of the metaphysics of modernism. Nevertheless, the metafictional playfulness signaled by Attebery in Tolkien's work serves to criticize a modernist, liberal humanist notion of literature. But rather than taking the metafictional techniques employed by Tolkien as significantly postmodernist, it could be argued that the critique of modernism comes from a completely different direction, namely from a pre-modern literary sensibility. In this sense, Tolkien's work testifies to a crack within the edifice of modernism, signaling its inevitable historicity. The anomalous but nevertheless active presence of an epic, heroic fantasy in Western literature predating the emergence of generic fantasy in the 1960s, in works such as E. R. Eddison's *The Worm Ouroborous* (1922) and Hope Mirrlees' *Lud-In-The-Mist* (1926), indicates that the modern constitution is untenably tied, as Bruno Latour argues, to the proliferation of quasi-objects and the production of hybrids. To this extent, Verlyn Flieger makes an interesting point in a discussion on Tolkien as a postmodern medievalist. Nuancing the medievalism often attributed to *The Lord of the Rings*, she argues that even though the work to a large degree unfolds as a medieval, heroic romance, it is also clearly situated in a modernist tradition, in a sense blending a modernist, realist literary mode with a pre-modern, mythological one.<sup>307</sup> Thus the plots and characters depicted have, Flieger argues, a realist tint, as is the epic, high style interspersed with a low, common style.<sup>308</sup>

Discussing the episode at the Stairs of Cirith Ungol, in *The Two Towers*, Book 4, Chapter VIII, Flieger shows how what can be analyzed as an instance of postmodernist metafiction is also grounded in medieval literary practice. Here, Sam refers to himself and Frodo as characters in a fairy tale: "I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales. We're in one, of course; but I mean: put into words, you know, told by the fireside, or read out of a great big book with red and black letters, years and years afterwards." (712) The situation not only calls attention to the story world as a narrative fiction but also points to the materiality of the book – *The Red book of Westmarch* certainly, but also the red covers and red and black print on the map of

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid., p 42

<sup>307</sup> "The Lord of the Rings subverts (we might even say deconstructs) itself by looking like a medieval, or pseudo-medieval, or imitatively medieval fantasy epic/romance/fairy tale, while in specific places in the narrative sounding like – in spirit, in character and (most important but least noticed) in tone – a surprisingly contemporary twentieth-century novel, very much in and typical of its time. And here Tolkien is not only not medieval, he is emphatically modern, or – dare I say it? – post-modern." Verlyn Flieger, *Green suns and Faërie: Essays on Tolkien* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2012), p 256

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., p 255





Figure 21: Cover and inlaid map of the first edition of J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954)

the first edition (Figure 21). Flieger concludes that the “scene on the Stairs of Cirith Ungol is itself an image of post-modern indeterminacy”. However, she adds that the technique “was used by the Beowulf poet twelve hundred or so years ago when, as a scop singing of Beowulf’s victory over Grendel, he sang of a scop singing of Beowulf’s victory over Grendel.”<sup>309</sup> Thus, rather than coming as a critique of modernism from an emergent, postmodernist, late-capitalist position, Tolkien’s work bears the trace of residual cultural practices, of pre-modern literature.

In his latest study of Western literary fantasy, *Stories about Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth* (2014), Brian Attebery makes an argument to this extent. Using Raymond Williams tripartite distinction of culture – emergent, dominant and residual – he argues that Tolkien and contemporary fantasy establishes a cultural practice that is – within the cultural history of modernity – both emergent and residual, both postmodern and pre-modern.<sup>310</sup> Chartering this interstitial territory, Attebery focuses on the uses and functions of myth in contemporary fantasy, arguing that the history of fantasy is “a history of mythopoiesis, modern myth-making”. With an important amendment: “though fantasy ‘makes’ myth only in the sense that a traditional oral performer makes the story she tells: not inventing but recreating that which has always existed only in performance, in the present.”<sup>311</sup>

Attebery claims that the practice of mythopoiesis in Tolkien and his contemporaries – in fantasy writers such as Mirrlees, Eddison and Charles Williams – is related to the uses of myth in canonical writers such as T S Eliot, James Joyce and Ezra Pound. Just as these high modernists, Tolkien and his contemporaries use myth as a correlate to reality. Distinct mythological traditions – Norse, Celtic, Christian, and Classical – are actualized within their narratives; but what is more important is that

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., p 259

<sup>310</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p 121-127

<sup>311</sup> Brian Attebery, *Stories about Stories, Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p 4



the relation towards these distinct mythologies is characterized by playfulness. Attebery cites this as the “mythic method” of fantasy, akin to T S Eliot’s idea of a “mythical method” by which the “immense panorama of futility and anarchy” of “contemporary history” can be ordered and given a shape.<sup>312</sup> However, unlike the mythical method that Eliot sees employed by Joyce and that he himself employs – where the mythological is enacted as a hermeneutical play with intertexts – the *mythic method* of fantasy it is not enacted on a figurative level: “Whereas poetry can leave its mythic basis on the figurative level, so that the Grail legend acts as a unifying conceit for all of Eliot’s observations and allusions, fantasy has to bring the impossible into the narrative ‘reality.’”<sup>313</sup>

The playfulness of the mythical method is in the high modernist versions of Eliot’s *The Waste Lands* or Joyce’s *Ulysses* located on the level of interpretation, as a play with signs and texts. Myth here functions as a stable framework imposed on a chaotic and transmogrifying reality, and enables a play for meaning brought on by a hermeneutic ambiguity in the text. In the work of Tolkien, Mirrlees and Williams, however, the playfulness of the mythic method is enacted within the narrative: participation in the play with the distinct versions of the myth is what makes the experience real, not how reality can be interpreted according to mythological forms. The mythic method brings the practice of mythology into literary narrative, where originality lies in the performance rather than what is performed. Attebery argues, by citing the ecofeminist writings of Ursula Le Guin and Donna Haraway’s notion of situated knowledge, that the strength of the mythic method of fantasy is its ability to present myth as always a version and a variant contingent on the context of a specific situation. This is how the fantasy of Tolkien is situated both as a pre-modern and as a postmodern phenomenon, revitalizing while at the same time breaking with tradition:

For Mirrlees, Wiliams, Tolkien, and others of their generation, fantasy became a way of living out, rather than simply retelling myths. By exploring perilous enchanted landscapes and negotiating fairy-tale laws, characters forged new relationships with archaic mysteries. Fantasy makes it new by making it old, and this version of the mythic method was to prove useful to an ever-growing number of readers and writers through the rest of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.<sup>314</sup>

Tom Shippey’s philological analysis of the genesis of Middle-earth indicates a similar position, in between a postmodern and pre-modern aesthetics. Shippey argues

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<sup>312</sup> T. S. Eliot, Frank Kermode, *The Selected Prose of T S Eliot* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1975), p 177

<sup>313</sup> Attebery, 2014, p 49

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, p 69

extensively that Tolkien's notion of sub-creation can largely be read as an application of the philological practice of asterisk realities, by which hypostasized words, or for that matter an entire language such as Indo-European are used to infer cognitive worlds. By tracing the transformation of numerous names – for persons as well as places – Shippey shows how Tolkien's secondary world is on the one hand replete with linguistic references to extant etymologies, particularly stemming from Old English.<sup>315</sup> On the other hand, Tolkien uses philology as a mold when constructing the fictive languages on which Middle-earth in turn is hypostasized. Through the historical layers of words – albeit fictional words – the asterisk world is authenticated. The insistence on the ontogenetic power of languages should, however, not be taken either as a postmodernist or as a modernist critique of metaphysics. Tolkien used his philological method, Shippey argues, “not because he wanted to shatter the ‘realist illusion’ of fiction but because he thought all our views of reality *were* illusions”, and continues: “He experimented with language not to see what interesting effects could be produced but because he thought all forms of human language were already an experiment.”<sup>316</sup>

The philological practice of asterisk realities locates creativity as a sympoietic configuration, as an event immersed in fragments, not merely the discontinuous fragments of distinct etymologies but material fragments as well, pinpointing the materialities of language. Hence the immense importance placed on the visual and auidial affordances of words in Tolkien's legendarium. One of the most discussed instances of asterisk sub-creation is Tolkien's alteration to the plural forms of the words dwarves and elves. The forms, with sound-changes marking them as Old English, as opposed to words of a more recent date, particularly those introduced after the Norman invasion, whose plural forms were regularly made by adding -s, are Tolkien's own invention.<sup>317</sup> Tolkien had consistently, since the publication of *The Hobbit*, used the plural dwarves and elves. Whatever his initial motivation for this – in letters commenting on the early reception of *The Hobbit*, Tolkien ascribes the incorrect spelling to the idiosyncrasies of “private bad grammar”<sup>318</sup>, claiming he “did not know better”.<sup>319</sup> By 1954, when the printing of *The Lord of the Rings* was underway, these forms had become integral to his art of sub-creation. Thus the use of the form dwarves signals an asterisk reality, differing from that in which the plural dwarfs is used. Shippey traces the etymological ramification of the words dwarf and elf,

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<sup>315</sup> This is the bearing argument of Shippey, 2005, particularly elaborated in Chapters 2, 3 and 4.

<sup>316</sup> Tom Shippey, *J. R. R. Tolkien, Author of the Century* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), p 315

<sup>317</sup> Shippey, 2005, p 64

<sup>318</sup> Carpenter, 2000, p 17

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*, p 25

pointing out how Tolkien's use of the plural forms is both grounded in philological histories and composes a novel innovation, integral to his aesthetics: "This activity of re-creation – creation from philology – lies at the heart of Tolkien's 'invention'".<sup>320</sup> Thus when the galley-proofs for the first edition arrived with consistent changes to the grammatically correct "dwarf" Tolkien was, understandably, perturbed.<sup>321</sup>

The re-creation of the dwarves and elves of Middle-earth is linked to Tolkien's well-attested intention of creating a mythology for England. This is, as Shippey argues, not so much a nationalistic project, as a linguistic and philological one. Granted, nation states and languages are historically intertwined. Nevertheless, the mythology Tolkien re-creates from philology comes from a realization that Old English lacks mythology, that the Arthurian tradition, used by the writer of *Sir Gawain*, "was originally non-English, indeed dedicated to the overthrow of England; its commemoration in English verse was merely a final consequence of the stamping-out of native culture after Hastings"<sup>322</sup>

### 3. Children of the *Legendarium*

Tolkien scholarship has delved extensively into the use of mythology in his work, focusing both on its influences and roots in extant mythological texts, evident not least in Tolkien's own scholarly research and on investigating Tolkien's explicit intention of establishing Middle-earth as a mythology for England. The presence of *Beowulf*, Arthurian romance, Celtic and Norse mythology in the works published by Tolkien during his lifetime, most notably in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* but certainly also salient in his epic poetry, has been forcibly accentuated by a massive posthumous publication under the editorship of Christopher Tolkien. *The Silmarillion* and *Unfinished Tales of Numenor and Middle-earth* situated Middle-earth in a full-fledged cosmogony whose contours, although certainly a large part of the aesthetic appeal of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, had only been hinted at earlier. The twelve volumes of *The History of Middle-earth* have further traced the outlines of this vastly encompassing mythological enterprise, focusing largely – as does, for example, *The Children of Húrin*, the last book to be explicitly published as a concluded narrative – on Tolkien's own mythology. Tolkien's early attempts at re-visioning and re-writing extant mythology have also seen the light in later publications, such as *The Legend of Sigurd & Gudrún* (2009) *The Fall of Arthur* (2013), *Beowulf* (2014), *The Story of Kullervo* (2015), *The Lay of Aotrou & Itroun* (2016) (Figure 22).

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<sup>320</sup> Shippey, 2005, p 65

<sup>321</sup> Carpenter, 2005, p 138

<sup>322</sup> Shippey, 2005, p 44

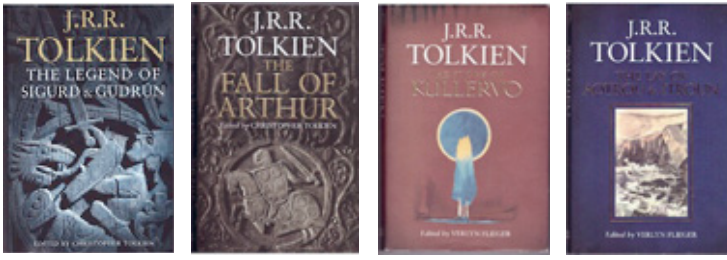


Figure 22: *The Legend of Sigurd & Gudrun* (2009) *The Fall of Arthur* (2013), *The Story of Kullervo* (2015), *The Lay of Aotrou & Itroun* (2016)

The many different versions of Tolkien’s mythology presented by Christopher Tolkien in the twelve volumes of *The History of Middle-earth* trace the genesis and evolution of the *Legendarium*. But the many re-writings and adaptations of the *Legendarium* into different forms of writing as well as into illustration and material artifacts undertaken by Tolkien in the course of his lifetime not merely testify to the evolution of Middle-earth as a coherent story world. The many variants of the stories comprising *The History of Middle-earth*, presented in different genres and media by Tolkien, are not just an indication of an ultimately frustrated attempt at reaching a finished form for publication. As already mentioned, Tolkien submitted a prose version of “The Silmarillion” to his publisher in December 1937, and he worked intermittently with the narratives comprising the *Legendarium*, with the intention of eventual publication.<sup>323</sup> However, there is no definite version of the *Legendarium* extant, and it is precisely the existence of variant versions that is made operative in Tolkien’s work, generating new material by ecological sympoiesis.<sup>324</sup> This is evidently true of the posthumously published material, but an ecological sympoiesis is also, as exemplified by the retroactive reconfiguration of the second edition of *The Hobbit*, traceable throughout the books printed during Tolkien’s lifetime.

In the mid 2010s, it has become apparent that the *Legendarium* has become a repository for new stories of a much greater magnitude than first envisioned by Tolkien and his publisher when discussing a possible sequel to *The Hobbit*. If the total sum of the material objects pertaining in one way or another to Middle-earth, and handed

<sup>323</sup> Tolkien submitted a prose version of “Quenta Silmarillion” together with the long poem “The Gest of Beren and Luthien” to Allen & Unwin in December 1937, both were rejected by the external reader, Edward Crankshaw.

<sup>324</sup> In this sense, it seem that the diligently executed and in many aspects clarifying discussion of the textuality of “The Silmarillion” undertaken by Charles E. Noad, while clearly having the benefits of providing a chronology and tracing the internal relations of the different variants, ultimately does itself a great disservice as Noad argues for an ideal Silmarillion text. The creative nexus of Tolkien’s Legendarium is precisely its resistance to ideal texts. See “On The Construction of ‘The Silmarillion’”, in Verlyn Flieger and Carl F. Hostetter (eds.), *Tolkien’s Legendarium: essays on The history of Middle-earth* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000), p

down to the Tolkien Estate, is by necessity finite, the proliferation of new books from this material seems potentially infinite. Evidently, the *Legendarium* continues to produce stories, with the help of editors and writers, official as well as unofficial.

## The Children of Húrin

The most salient example of an official text generated by media-ecological symposium is the story of Túrin Turambar, known as “The Children of Húrin”<sup>325</sup>. First published in *The Silmarillion* as “Of Túrin Turambar”, the story was considerably fleshed out in *Unfinished Tales*, here as “Narn I Hîn Húrin – The Tale of the Children of Húrin”, meant to be read as an enlargement but also as an addition to the previously published material. In 2007, the story was published as a stand-alone book, *The Children of Húrin*, now explicitly presented as a concluded narrative. In the preface Christopher Tolkien states his intention to publish “the legend of the Children of Húrin as an independent work, between its own covers, with a minimum of editorial presence, and above all in continuous narrative without gaps or interruptions, if this could be done without distortion or invention, despite the unfinished state in which he [J. R. R. Tolkien] left some parts of it.”<sup>326</sup> In addition to these different publications, versions of the story have been presented in *The History of Middle-earth* – at length in prose form in *The Book of Lost Tales, Part Two* (1984) and in verse form in *The Lays of Beleriand* (1985). The fourth volume of *The History of Middle-earth, The Shaping of Middle-earth* (1986) contains a transcription of “The earliest ‘Silmarillion’”, where the story of “the Children of Húrin”, while not elaborated extensively, occupies a central position. The issue is briefly and summarily touched on in “The Later Annals of Beleriand”, published in the fifth volume in 1987, while “The Grey Annals”, published in volume ten, *Morgoth’s Ring* (1993) elaborated in some detail on the subject.

Though presented as an original and independent work, the 2007 *Children of Húrin* is an amalgam of different versions. Although largely coinciding with previous versions, the narrative nevertheless contains passages previously unseen. Whether these new passages derive from fragments not included in earlier publications or derive from editorial necessity in order to minimize the explicit “editorial presence” referred to in the preface is not really the point here. *The Children of Húrin* is clearly a configurative work.

In its different versions, the narrative of Túrin Turambar exemplifies Tolkien’s mythic method. It is a method that, at the same time as it enforces a new configu-

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<sup>325</sup> As in the case of “The Silmarillion”, “The Children of Húrin” will here refer to the narrative as an ideal text, while *The Children of Húrin* refers to the 2007 book.

<sup>326</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Children of Húrin*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 2007), p 9

ration, retains the trace of sympoietic collaboration. While each publication of the story clearly (and nowhere as ostensibly as in *Unfinished Tales*) presents an alternate version of the story, the consecutive editions published by Christopher Tolkien also serve an archontic function, each version claiming, if not explicitly then at least by virtue of the narrative form, to be the true and concluded configuration. The media ecology of Middle-earth generates the story of Túrin Turambar as an archontic textuality, each version opening up for ecological sympoiesis while at the same time enforcing narrative closure. Here, the tension between archive and ecology is particularly salient. It is this peculiar ontological ambiguity that puts the story of Túrin Turambar at the center of the media ecology of Middle-earth; emerging as a configured and concluded narrative within the material of the *Legendarium*, it stands out as thematically central as well as one of the most elaborated episodes. At the same time it enforces reconfiguration, thus questioning the notion of authorship and creativity as an autonomous activity. It is this tension in the authorial function – between an autonomous, strictly autopoietic, and archontic function on the one hand, and a distributed, sympoietic and ecological function on the other – that explains Tolkien’s position in the emergence of the fantasy genre. And in extension, it is the ability to accommodate both extremes of this tension, operating on both an individual and a communal level, that enables the cultural and commercial influence of the Tolkien franchise. The uncanny agency of magical things thus informs and to a certain degree reconfigures – following a reconfiguration of liberal humanism – the processes of reification and commodification in modern, capitalist society.

## Adaptation and Innovation

It has long been a well-known fact that Tolkien based “The Children of Húrin” on the story of Kullervo, told in Cantos 31 to 36 of the Finnish epic the *Kalevala*. The exact relation to the Kullervo of the *Kalevala* has, however, been a debatable subject in Tolkien studies. Humphrey Carpenter states that while parts of the story – in particular the theme of incest – are clearly derived from *Kalevala*, the influences are nevertheless merely “superficial”.<sup>327</sup> Commenting on the subject in his letters, Tolkien repeatedly stated that “The Silmarillion” and the *Legendarium* could be traced back to his abandoned attempts at adapting the story of Kullervo, in “the lines of Morris’ romances with chunks of poetry in between”<sup>328</sup>, while at Oxford prior to the

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<sup>327</sup> Carpenter, 1977, p 96. Carpenter continues: “‘The Children of Húrin’ is a powerful fusion of Icelandic and Finnish traditions, but it passes beyond this to achieve a degree of dramatic complexity and subtlety of characterisation not often found in ancient legends.” (96)

<sup>328</sup> Carpenter, 2005, p 7

war.<sup>329</sup> Studies of the *Legendarium* have focused on Kullervo and the *Kalevala* as one of its sources, if not by direct imitation, then by establishing a model for Tolkien's work, where textual artifacts are transmitted and reused over an extended period of time, in this sense comprising a mythology.<sup>330</sup>

The publication of Tolkien's adaptation of the *Kalevala* in *Tolkien Studies VII* in 2010 offered new insights into his mythic method. It now becomes clear that while using large parts of the Finnish epic in his reconfiguration, Tolkien emended the story in several important aspects. Most interesting are the changes made to the family relations of Kullervo. These changes could be traced to inconsistencies in the source material. In her commentary on the edition, Verlyn Flieger points out that the *Kalevala* presents a contradictory version of Kullervo's family history.<sup>331</sup> In Canto 31 of the *Kalevala*, Kullervo's entire family is murdered by his uncle Untamo, the only exception being his mother, pregnant with Kullervo. However, in Canto 34, Kullervo learns that both his parents are still alive, and in addition, that he has a sister and a brother unknown to him. This contradictory fact is not elaborated upon in the *Kalevala*; it is merely reported and in fact it is probably one of the inconsistencies that Tolkien approvingly highlights, in his talk on the *Kalevala*, as the main reason for his interest in the epic: "the queer and the strange, the unrestrained, the grotesque, is not only interesting: it is valuable."<sup>332</sup> The reason for this inconsistency is found in the circumstances under which Elias Lönnrot configured and collated the *Kalevala*, where the sources of the Kullervo episode came from two (or more) different oral traditions.<sup>333</sup> Thus Lönnrot configured a narrative from different material sources, generating, as it were, an inconsistent narrative. And it is this very inconsistency that retains a trace of the environment – assembling oral telling with written narrative, the mythic with the epic, within which the *Kalevala* was generated.

Responding to the configurative textuality of *Kalevala* and the story of Kullervo, Tolkien engages in an act of reorganization that itself retains the trace of the dis-

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<sup>329</sup> In the letter to Auden, in preparation for his appearance on the BBC, Tolkien writes: "I was immensely attracted by something in the air of the *Kalevala*, even in Kirby's poor translation. I never learned Finnish well enough to do more than plod through a bit of the original, like a schoolboy with Ovid; being mostly taken up with its effect on 'my language.' But the beginning of the *Legendarium*, of which the *Trilogy* is part (the conclusion), was an attempt to reorganize some of the *Kalevala*, especially the tale of Kullervo the hapless, onto a form of my own." Carpenter, 2000, p 214.

<sup>330</sup> Charles E Noad's presentation of the textual evolution of "The *Silmarillion*" argues that the *Kalevala* and the story of Kullervo first and foremost serve as a model for such a particular mythic method. Noad, 2000, p 37

<sup>331</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Story of Kullervo*, edited by Verlyn Flieger (London: HarperCollins, 2015), p 148

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*, p 71. The talk held by Tolkien is extant in two versions, both unpublished and incomplete. In the typescript draft the quoted section reads as follows: "Yet the queer and strange, the unrestrained, the grotesque is not only interesting it is valuable: it is one of the eternal and permanent interests and attractions of men." *Ibid.*, p 104

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, p 148.



tributed agency of ecological sympoiesis. In part the response can be seen, as Tom Shippey argues, as emerging from a philological practice. In other reorganizations of epic and mythic material – his translations of *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as well as his retellings of legends in *The Fall of Arthur* and *The Legend of Sigurd & Gudrún* – Tolkien often responded to similar inconsistencies in the source material.<sup>334</sup> A well-known episode is in *The Hobbit*, when Bilbo steals a cup from Smaug’s hoard, an episode that functions as a reworking of a problematic and damaged passage in *Beowulf* and as such, epitomizes a “modus operandi” in Tolkien’s aesthetics, according to Flieger, that is in place even in his earliest reorganization of the story of Kullervo.<sup>335</sup> And as HarperCollins published *The Story of Kullervo* in 2015, transforming a scholarly edition of a fragmented and incomplete manuscript into a printed work of literature, the adaptation and reorganization of material from the *Kalevala* initiated by Tolkien in 1913, in response to the traces of sympoiesis in the story of Kullervo, obtained its latest – but probably not the last – configuration.

Thus the textual history of “The Children of Húrin” is characterized by collaborative creativity, where a number of different agencies are involved in the configuration. But it is also the case that the actual texts, the stories as they are executed in their different versions, in their narrative segments, retain a trace of this sympoiesis. In a discussion on the textuality of *The Silmarillion*, Gergely Nagy presents an argument of some relevance. According to Nagy, the distinct styles of *The Silmarillion* cannot merely be attributed to the different source materials from which it is adapted, differing, as David Bratman has pointed out, both generically and chronologically.<sup>336</sup> The distinct styles of *The Silmarillion* are also operative within small textual units, functioning – says Nagy – as indications of distinct oral traditions within the storyworld. By incorporating traces of adaptation from actual or hypostasized sources, Tolkien succeeds in inscribing the oral practice of mythology into a written narrative. These traces of adaptation, whether they can be traced back to an extant source or not – Nagy mainly investigates the adaptation of verse into prose – are nevertheless important to the textuality of *The Silmarillion*. As a literary work, claims Nagy, *The Silmarillion* is “not only about telling stories that go with other stories (like *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*): it is about the story of stories, both in a historical and a metafictional sense.”<sup>337</sup> The instances of adapted verse that Nagy traces in *The Silmar-*

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<sup>334</sup> John Garth, “‘The Road from Adaptation to Innovation’: How Tolkien came to the Brink of Middle-earth in 1914”, in *Tolkien Studies*, Vol. 11, 2014, p 1-41. Shippey, 2005, p 44

<sup>335</sup> Tolkien, 2015, p 145f

<sup>336</sup> David Bratman argues that *The Silmarillion*, as collated by Christopher Tolkien and Guy Gavriel Kay, comprises three distinct styles: Antique, Annalistic and Appendical. These three styles pertain to three different genres, with distinct histories of composition. “The Literary Value of *The History of Middle-earth*”, Vliieger and Hostetter, 2000, p 72-74

<sup>337</sup> Gergely Nagy, “The adapted text: The Lost Poetry of Beleriand”, in *Tolkien Studies*, Vol. 1, 2004, p 36

*illion*, mainly by analyzing the implementation of various poetic and rhetorical strategies typical of oral traditions, are thus indications of a media-ecological sympoiesis. They do not merely mark the activity of an editor implementing narrative form to a disparate material; at the same time, by virtue of the distributed ecology of this mark, they open the door to sympoietic configuration. This is at the heart of the art of the fantastic as it is employed in the media ecology of Middle-earth. It is thus untenable to separate, as John Garth has proposed, Tolkien's practice of adaptation from his creative innovation.<sup>338</sup> The traces of adaptation – of sympoietic configuration – are integral to the way the sense of historical depth is operative within Middle-earth, not merely functioning as material remnants of historical documents but also, by emphasizing participation in the construction of the historical narrative, making the reader part of and responsible for the creation of this particular history.

Accordingly, the different versions of “The Children of Húrin” are eminent examples of how the archontic consignation of a material environment is linked to the distributed agency of a media ecology. Every new version of the text – whether in manuscript or printed form – establishes itself as *the* archontic version, as the ultimate implementation of the official archive, while retaining, by virtue of the configurative textuality of the archontic, the impetus for new sympoietic configurations. It is thus natural that Christopher Tolkien's latest edition *The Children of Húrin* appears as a composite narrative of heterogeneous material. Nor is it surprising that the publication of *The Story of Kullervo* enforces a new reconfiguration of the material.

A closer look at Christopher Tolkien's introduction to *The Children of Húrin* is elucidating. With the express intention of minimizing the editorial presence, Christopher Tolkien nevertheless feels obliged to provide a general background, historically and geographically situating the narrative within the *Legendarium*. Throughout this short introduction – only fifteen pages – several different narrative positions and modes are employed. Some of these conflicting positions are innate to the hybrid narrative form of scholarly introductions, where quotation and paraphrase take a large part of the narration; however, it soon becomes clear that the narrative delineations and borders of this introduction are particularly permeable. The authorial position of the “Introduction” undergoes a repetition of narrative metalepsis. Initially embarking on the narrative from a position of editor – stating that “the character of Túrin was of deep significance to my father” – the narrator soon lapses into a position of focalized narration. When relating how Morgoth puts the curse on Húrin and his kin, the transformation is traceable within a single sentence: “Now become permanently incarnate, in form a gigantic and majestic, but terrible, King in the north-west of Middle-earth, he was physically present in his huge fortress of Angband, the Hells

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<sup>338</sup> Garth, 2014, p 1-41

of Iron: the black reek that issued from the summits of Thangorodrim, the mountains that he piled above Angband, could be seen far off staining the northern sky.”<sup>339</sup> The distanced narration of the editorial position is displaced by a much more pronounced literary style, situating the enunciation within the fictive, textual world of Middle-earth. Similarly the distinction between different source material used in paraphrases and quotations is at once precise and correct, referring both to previously published books and official versions of the story, and proleptically to the ensuing narrative of *The Children of Húrin*, while at the same time meandering into a mode where distinctions between academic and literary discourse blur, referring to source material more as formulaic expression of storytelling. In these passages, editor becomes author, and the sources to which the quotations refer, extant as primary material and printed in earlier publications, merge with the general sense of historical depth.<sup>340</sup>

While Christopher Tolkien repeatedly – here, as in every other publication of the posthumous material – refers to the authorial authority of his father, often by explicitly citing the specific material aspects of the written text – paper, ink or pencil, quality of hand – it nonetheless becomes apparent, perhaps here more than ever, that the authorship is also collective and collaborative, situated in the environment. Just as his father plays with the relation between editor, collator and author in the prefaces to his writings pertaining to Middle-earth, generating the hybrid authorial position and configurative textuality essential to his mythopoiesis, it would seem here that Christopher Tolkien too has been caught up in the game. If the creativity of Middle-earth emerges as a distributed agency, as an ecology of distributed things with agency in which – as stated at the outset of this chapter – the historical figure (literally as well as figuratively) of J. R. R. Tolkien can be considered the most influential while not the ontologically privileged agent, it has, arriving at *The Children of Húrin* become clear that Christopher Tolkien upholds a position of equal, if not higher, influence, in the posthumous publication of Tolkien’s work.

Perhaps it is for this reason that in his commentary on the composition of the text in the second part of the appendix to *The Children of Húrin*, Christopher Tolkien feels obliged to stress the fidelity of the text to an extant (albeit by all appearances somewhat still hypostasized) version of the story.<sup>341</sup> Whereas the versions in *The*

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<sup>339</sup> Tolkien, 2007, p 14f

<sup>340</sup> Two good examples from the introduction are the following: “Then (*it is told*) ‘Morgoth came. For he could not refuse such a challenge before the face of his captains.’” (Ibid., p 15, emphasis added) and “But *it was said* afterwards that when Morgoth learned of the arising of Men he left Angband for the last time and went into the East; and that the first Men to enter Beleriand ‘had repented and rebelled against the Dark Power and were cruelly hunted and oppressed by those that worshipped it, and its servants’”, Ibid., p 25, emphasis added.

<sup>341</sup> “In *The Silmarillion* I of course followed the *Annals*, though with some features taken from the *Narn* version; but in this book I have kept to the text that my father thought appropriate to the *Narn* as a whole.” Ibid., p 285

*Silmarillion* and *Unfinished Tales* – which together constitute most of the material included in *The Children of Húrin* – were based on conjectures by the editors regarding events and chronology, Christopher Tolkien now claims to be adhering to his father's original design.

“I have come to think that when I composed the text in *Unfinished Tales* I allowed myself more editorial freedom than was necessary. In this book I have reconsidered the original manuscripts and reconstituted the text, in many (usually very minor) places restoring the original words, introducing sentences or brief passages that should not have been omitted, correcting a few errors, and making different choices among the original readings.”<sup>342</sup>

It is not, then, *The Children of Húrin* that constitutes a new configuration of the story. It is rather the previously published versions that, for reasons partly due to the fragmented and conflicting source material but perhaps also partly due to the exigencies of the mode of publication, were unfaithful to the original. The argument is not particularly convincing, and not because Christopher Tolkien has not undertaken a more thorough study of the manuscripts, as he claims, this he clearly has, which certainly the twelve volumes of *The History of Middle-earth* prove.<sup>343</sup> No, it is simply not to the point, not with the sense of originality Christopher Tolkien is trying to impose. Rather, it corroborates the understanding of the *Legendarium* as a configurative textuality, and as such an original version can be retroactively configured – “reconstituted” as Christopher Tolkien says – from derivative material, precisely because it is an archontic version. Evidently, *The Children of Húrin* is in a very real sense *written* by Christopher Tolkien; however, this does not, preclude it from citing J. R. R. Tolkien as its author. It is an original book, having been created on a previous occasion.

In a number of smaller areas, as Christopher Tolkien states, *The Children of Húrin* differs from the previously published versions; words and phrases are rearranged or inserted, creating a new version. But concerning two episodes the changes are considerable. Both episodes are of particular interest to the present argument. The first concerns the time Túrin spends together with his band of outlaws at the home of the Petty-dwarf Mîm. In *The Silmarillion* it is said that Mîm and his two sons are the last individuals of a family of dwarves “banished in ancient days from the great Dwarf-cities of the east”, and that the Petty-dwarves became “diminished in stature and in smith-craft, and they took to lives of stealth, walking with bowed shoulders

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<sup>342</sup> Ibid., p 286

<sup>343</sup> Ibid., p 283

and furtive steps.”<sup>344</sup> Not knowing the (original and not diminished) race of dwarves, since these had not yet come west of the mountains, the elves of Beleriand initially hunted and killed the Petty-Dwarves. Understandingly, in *The Silmarillion* version, Mîm hates elves. In *The Children of Húrin* this general hatred of elves is restricted to a more specified hatred of the Noldor, who, it was believed, “had stolen their lands and their homes.”<sup>345</sup> The genocidal aspects of the persecution of Petty-Dwarves are also played down, as is the biologism of their genealogy.<sup>346</sup> But the largest alteration by far concerns the episode of Mîm’s betrayal. This is a central episode in the tragedy, leading up to Túrin’s accidental slaying of his friend Beleg. In the early versions Mîm betrays Túrin in order to save his son Ibun, who has been captured by a band of orcs sent out by Morgoth from Angband to hunt the son of Húrin.<sup>347</sup> In the version published in *The Children of Húrin*, Mîm deliberately seeks out the orcs in order to lead them to Túrin, and it is only afterwards that his son is held hostage. Interestingly, however, the earlier version is referred to in a note in *The Children of Húrin*, delivered in the narrative voice of the author, and not the editor, thus referring to an alternate version extant within the fiction.<sup>348</sup>

The other major change concerns chronology and deals with when Beleg receives the black sword Anglachel from Thingol, which in the latest version comes to pass at the very outset, when Beleg first seeks Túrin, and not after finding him among the outlaws. Both these changes have a bearing on the ethos of Middle-earth, stressing in the first case the moral responsibility of a deliberate action, and in the second highlighting the peculiar destabilizing ability of animate things. By further ascribing deliberation and intent to Mîm’s treacherous deeds it would seem that the latest version of the text enforces a stronger condemnation than the previous ones, where his actions, though grounded in hatred and a (genetically?) deficient moral constitution, are motivated by love for his son. Emphasis is put on Mîm as an individual, rather than as a representative of the degenerate race of Petty-Dwarves, morally auto-

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<sup>344</sup> Tolkien, J. R. R.; Tolkien, Christopher, *The Silmarillion* (Boston; Houghton Mifflin, 1977), p 204

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, p 121

<sup>346</sup> Rather than stemming from the moral deficiency at fault for their presumed banishment, the diminished stature and ensuing adaptation to a skulking life of stealth is in *The Children of Húrin* framed as brought on by the new living environment. “Being masterless and few in number, they found it hard to come by the re of metals, and their smith-craft and store of weapons dwindled; and they took to lives of stealth, and became somewhat smaller in stature than their eastern kin, walking with bent shoulders and a furtive step.” *Ibid.*, p 121-122

<sup>347</sup> The version published in *Unfinished Tales* refers the reader to the episode as related in *The Silmarillion* in the main narrative but gives a longer, more elaborated rendering of Túrin’s stay at Mîm’s dwellings in an appendix. However, no mention of how Mîm betrays Túrin is made in the appendix, and apart from this detail, *The Children of Húrin* largely follows the appendix.

<sup>348</sup> “But another tale is told, which has it that Mîm did not encounter the Orcs with deliberate intent. It was the capture of his son and their threat to torture that led Mîm to his treachery.” Tolkien, 2007, p 148n

mous and causally responsible for his actions. However, the footnote referring to the other version enforces the configurative textuality of the narrative; the treatment of Mím and the Petty-Dwarves, arguably an example of the problematic traces of colonialism found throughout Tolkien's work, turns into a metafictional discussion on the ethics of narration. By exposing a variant to the narrative, the narrative not merely functions as an object of interpretation, but also demands participation in order to be interpreted. The configuration of the episode becomes a question of being ethically responsible for which story world the narrative enforces.

Likewise the malevolent, magical agency of Anglachel is deeply intertwined with the ethics and aesthetic of the media ecology of Middle-earth. Beside the Ring, Anglachel is perhaps the most salient example of a thing with agency in Tolkien's *Legendarium*. Imbued with a vibrant, vital materiality, the sword interferes with and becomes part of Túrin's doomed fate, wielding an unnatural influence on its bearer that is further emphasized by its influence on the structure of the narrative, much as the Ring enforces a reconfiguration of *The Hobbit*. After Mím's betrayal, Túrin's company is killed and he is taken prisoner. Rescued on the way to Angband by Beleg, a tortured and senselessly drugged Túrin, thinking his friend is an orc, seizes his sword and slays him. The episode stresses how the action appears as a sympoietic feedback, structurally coupling things and persons as well as the specific circumstances of the environment.

Beleg drew his sword Anglachel, and with it he cut the fetters that bound Túrin; but fate was that day more strong, for the blade of Eöl the Dark Elf slipped in his hand, and pricked Turin's foot.

Then Túrin was roused into a sudden wakefulness of rage and fear, and seeing a form bending over him in the gloom with a naked blade on hand he leapt up with a great cry, believing that Orcs were come again to torment him; and grappling with him on the darkness he seized Anglachel, and slew Beleg Cúthalion thinking him a foe.<sup>349</sup>

Perhaps more than any other object in the *Legendarium*, "The Children of Húrin", throughout all its different versions, emphasizes the tension between the official versions of Tolkien's Middle-earth – epitomized by the archontic textuality of Christopher Tolkien's twelve volumes of *The History of Middle-earth*, an achievement he himself describes as a the result of a media archeology – and the ecological sympoiesis of configuration. Not merely adapting extant mythological traditions – the *Kalevala*, *Beowulf*, the poetic *Edda* – the distribution of different material versions and the traces of variant texts and media interspersed throughout each version situate the mythological in the present, as an ongoing process.

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<sup>349</sup> Ibid., p 154

In an astute reading of the different versions of “The Children of Húrin” (published in 2003, it does not take *The Children Húrin* into consideration) Gergely Nagy argues that the repeated reconfigurations of the story – Nagy uses the term “retexualisation” – are what generate the sense of a pseudo-historical depth in Middle-earth.<sup>350</sup> It is not the fact that these texts are connected to a mythological base-text that generates depth, nor that they are grounded in a cultural practice of a system of myths. In fact, Nagy suggest that the notion of myth as an original text is erroneous. Instead, it is how every retelling of a myth hypostasizes an original that is of relevance: “Apart from very general narrative lines and characterizations, we cannot reconstruct the implied version of which all mythological stories claim to be retexts. What I propose is the handling of *myth as a pseudo-text*, with an indefinite number of retexts”<sup>351</sup>. In the media ecology of Middle-earth, innovation is always adaptation, and accordingly, *The Children of Húrin* will not be the last word said, or printed, on the story of Túrin Turambar. Of which, of course, the publication of *The Story of Kullervo* is already a strong indication.

#### 4. Pirate configurations: unauthorized authors

Innovative editorial practices and mythic methods notwithstanding, limitations on the collaborative creativity of the media ecology of Middle-earth do exist. And they are significant, manifested in the legal rights to J. R. R. Tolkien’s corpus, currently held by the Tolkien Estate. From the perspective of the Tolkien Estate, the history of Middle-earth has most definitely reached its fulfillment. Here, the archive of Middle-earth, if not having reached the final consignment of the “in-finite”, as foreshadowed

by Derrida, has nevertheless a clear conception of its limits. On the official website, under the heading “Is it possible to write stories that are set in Middle-earth?” this position is unequivocal: “The short answer is most definitely NO!” (Figure 23).



Figure 23: Screenshot of the Tolkien Estate’s official webpage<sup>352</sup>

<sup>350</sup> “The Túrin texts make it clear by the relations established between them that a multilayered understanding of depth (on the levels of primary world philology, readerly and critical inquiry, and parallel ‘secondary levels’ inside the textual world) can explain the mythological quality and help considerably in the interpretation of particular texts.” Gergely Nagy, “The Great Chain of Reading”, in Jane Chance (ed.), *Tolkien the Medievalist* (London: Routledge, 2003), p 241

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid*, p 252

<sup>352</sup> Webpage accessed February 2, 2017, <http://www.tolkienestate.com/en/paths/faq/permissions-requests.html>



Nevertheless, people do write stories set in Middle-earth. Within the Tolkien fandom, the production and distribution of fan-fiction and fan-art has been an ongoing activity for more than half a century; from a slow start in the late 1950s, the proliferation of Tolkien societies picked up in the 1970s and 1980s. Within the publications circulated through these societies, an overwhelming amount of material has been produced.<sup>353</sup> The borders between fan-fiction and professionally published but unofficial continuations are permeable, naturally. Texts produced and circulated within fan communities, published in fanzines, sometimes get to professional publication. Early examples of such a migration are Marion Zimmer Bradley's two versions of the story of Arwen and Aragon, initially published in the Tolkien fanzine *I, Palantir* in 1961 and 1964, and later reissued in 1974 by TK Graphics. Besides travelling from an amateur, fanzine platform, to a (semi-) professional publishing format, and as such an example of the textual fluidity of the media ecology of Middle-earth, these two stories show how the traces of configuration in the work of Tolkien generate new versions. In her two short stories, Zimmer Bradley develops briefly on topics mentioned in passing in *The Lord of the Rings*, material that, in relation to what is mentioned about Arwen and Aragorn in the appendices, offers, if not a discordant, at least a somewhat incomplete narrative. Filling a gap in the narrative, and at the same time supplementing a female perspective on what is otherwise a narrative that is largely devoid of such, Zimmer Bradley's configurations point the way to later practice, both within amateur work and within commercial adaptations such as Jackson's films, where the changes to Arwen and the addition of a female lead, the character Tauriel in *The Hobbit* films, are particularly salient (Figure 24).

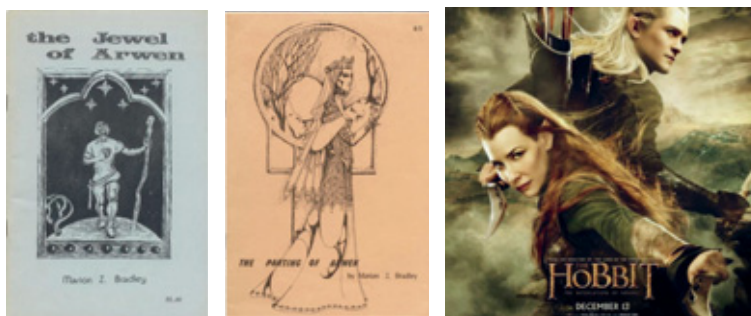


Figure 24: Marion Zimmer Bradley, “The Jewel of Arwen” and “The Parting of Arwen”; Official poster for *The Hobbit, The Desolation of Smaug* (2013), featuring the characters Legolas (Orlando Bloom) and Tauriel (Evangeline Lilly)

<sup>353</sup> “Tolkien Fannish and Scholarly Activities and Publications” (1993), by Gary Hunnewell, lists the publications by year. [http://fanac.org/Fannish\\_Reference\\_Works/Tolkien/Tolkien.html](http://fanac.org/Fannish_Reference_Works/Tolkien/Tolkien.html)

A considerable number of new narratives set in Middle-earth have since the late 1970s been written within the franchises created around adaptations of Tolkien's work into table-top role-playing games and computer games, most notably in the material produced by ICE from 1984 to 1999. Although produced for commercial use, these products have not been marketed as literature, though the codex-format often used, as the discussion of ICE's Middle-earth solo role-playing books will elucidate, has led to debates over copyright infringement.

While fan-fiction is an eminent example of archontic textuality – as mentioned, the concept was developed by Abigail Derecho in a study on fan fiction – the following discussion will be limited to pirate configurations that have been printed and published, mainly because as such, these objects, merely by their materiality, show how literary autonomy in liberal democracies serves a juridical-economic function as well as an aesthetic one.<sup>354</sup>

## Parodies

There is one kind of configurative text in which the regulations of the publishing industry and book market seem to be particularly unclear, and that is the nebulous phenomenon called parody. Parodies are by definition configurative texts; emerging in explicit relation to other texts; parodies constitute a reconfiguration of a source text – or source texts – with an explicit purpose, generally satire.<sup>355</sup> As such, parodies emerge from and engage in an environment and are in this sense dependent on that environment while rearranging it: “The most rigorous form of parody”, writes Gérard Genette, who investigates parody as a model form of intertextual relationship, consists in “taking up a familiar text and giving it new meaning, while, if possible and as needed, playing on the words”.<sup>356</sup> Structurally and functionally, parody has occupied a central position in Western cultural history as one of the premier-sanctioned modes for textual transformation; and while the function of parody can denote a number of different historical genres – and where the difference between travesty, caricature

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<sup>354</sup> Mark Rose notes that copyright, though perhaps preceded by some notion of intellectual property, emerges together with many of the institutions of Western, modern, liberal and humanist, democracies: “But copyright – the practice of securing marketable rights in texts that are treated as commodities – is a specifically modern institution, the creature of the printing press, the individualization of authorship in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, and the development of the advanced marketplace in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.” Mark Rose, *Authors and Owners* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p 3

<sup>355</sup> From a juridical point of view this is perhaps a larger problem, than from an aesthetic viewpoint. Michael Spence, in an attempt to offer some “modest proposals” to treat copyright infringements by parody concludes: “No stable understanding of the term ‘parody’ exists.”, Michael Spence, “Intellectual Property and the Problem of Parody”, *Law Quarterly Review*, vol. 114, 1998, issue 4

<sup>356</sup> Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman & Claude Doubinsk (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p 16

and parody is largely a question for hermeneutics<sup>357</sup> – what is of interest here is the historical fact that the generic label parody offers exemption, in the United States as well as in the UK, from copyright laws regulating intellectual property.<sup>358</sup>

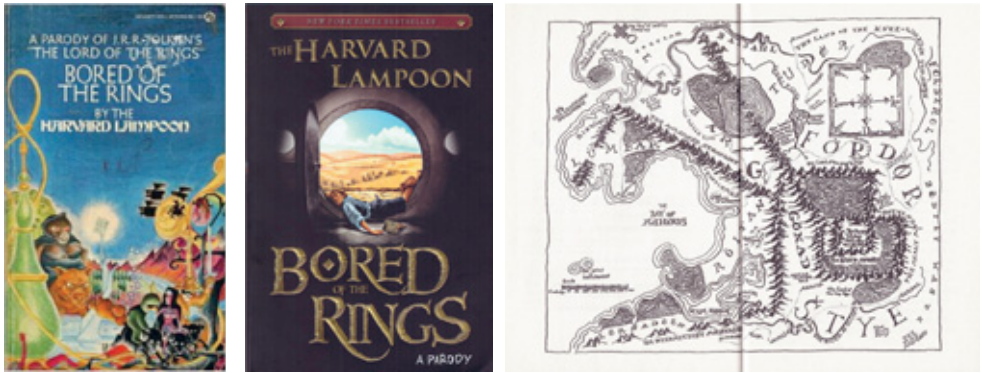


Figure 25: Henry N. Beard and Douglas C. Kennedy, *Bored of the Rings*, (1969), and *Bored of the Rings* (2012), map from the 2012 edition

Several notable, and best-selling, parodies based on Tolkien’s work have been commercially published, starting with the 1969 Harvard Lampoon *Bored of the Rings*, by Henry N. Beard and Douglas C. Kenney (Figure 25). While not using Tolkien’s cultural and linguistic taxonomy and changing relevant names, but using a map with clear antecedent in Tolkien’s maps, *Bored of the Rings* closely follows Tolkien’s book. Starting out as a rather detailed satirical version of the Preface and Foreword – in the 2012 revised edition three forewords are presented: “Boreword”, “Foreword” and “Prologue – Concerning Boggies” – emulating and exaggerating the precise and meticulous style and use of notes, the narrative evolves, after leaving the house of Tom Benzadrino – a hippie version of Tom Bombadil – into a “highly abbreviated plot summary”.<sup>359</sup> Nevertheless, this successful parody – “predominately concerned with making money”<sup>360</sup> – is not merely a reflection on the historical circumstances surrounding Tolkien’s popularity in the mid-1960s. It is that too, certainly, and *Bored of the Rings* grounds *The Lord of the Rings* in youth culture and in the counter culture movements of the time, and as such mirrors and to some extent foreshadows the adaptation of Tolkien and Tolkien-inspired iconography in popular culture, not least in

<sup>357</sup> Ibid., pp 10-27

<sup>358</sup> Spence, 1998

<sup>359</sup> Michael D. C. Drout, *J. R. R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: scholarship and critical assessment* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p 503

<sup>360</sup> Henry N. Beard and Douglas C Kenney, *Bored of the Rings, a Parody*, 2012 revised edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012 (1969)), p xxi

the music industry.<sup>361</sup> But what is more relevant to the present discussion is that the book highlights aspects central to a media ecological understanding of the function of fantasy. Clearly the use of maps and the traces of different levels of adaptation, as well as the different materialities explicitly referred to in Tolkien's preface and foreword and later employed throughout the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*, have provoked participation and reconfiguration in the form of a satirical continuation. The metafictional tendency of fantasy is highlighted. To this extent, the different modes of representation employed by Tolkien as well as the use of invented languages are profusely satirized throughout the book. Furthermore, the metaleptic impetus of prophecy – where a verbal sequence uttered within the storyworld is imbued with the potential power to narrate that story world – is made explicit in the character of Bromosel, the *Bored of the Rings*-version of Boromir. After relating a verse from a prophetic dream in a parody of the council of Elrond – “Five-eleven’s your height, one-ninety your weight/You cash in your chips around page eighty-eight”<sup>362</sup> – Bromosel becomes aware of his existence as part of a narrative and starts referring to the materiality of the book as both a temporal extension, measuring the time until his prophesized demise, and a spatial environment of existence, a space shared by the reader as well as the characters and events depicted. So, on page 69 Bromosel concludes that he still has some time left in life: “No,’ agreed Bromosel, looking across the gray surface of the page to the thick half of the book still in the reader’s right hand. ‘We have a long way to go.’”<sup>363</sup> While the narrative metalepsis here verges more on the comical than on the fantastical, the narrative nevertheless gestures towards the physical engagement of a reader.

Besides this insistence on the fictional status of the narrative – where the metafictional play of Bromosel is supplemented by a number of references to well-known fantasy and romance fictions<sup>364</sup> – another relevant aspect of the media ecology of Middle-earth is made abundantly clear by *Bored of the rings*: the function of the cultural object as a commodity. The predominant mode of textual transformation operative in *Bored of the Rings* replaces the names of Tolkien’s Middle-earth with brand names from contemporary consumer culture. Frodo becomes Frito, Sam Spam, Pippin Pepsi, and so on, and the foreign-sounding but etymologically meticulous

<sup>361</sup> Most famous, perhaps, is that the British rock group Led Zeppelin adapts material from *The Lord of the Rings* in the songs “Ramble On”, “Over The Hills and Far Away”, “No Quarter”, while many other songs allude to a fantasy-Tolkienesque milieu. The song “Misty Mountain Hop” refers to a passage from *The Hobbit*. Swedish instrumental progressive rock artist Bo Hansson made a well-received album based on *The Lord of the Rings*, in 1970. There are, naturally, plenty more.

<sup>362</sup> Beard and Kenney, 2012, p 61

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, p 69

<sup>364</sup> As when referring to the lures of “Turkish taffy” (*Ibid.*, p 23) and in the verse Goodgulf (a satirical version of Gandalf) utters when trying to access the scrying sphere: “Queequeg quahog!/Quodnam quixote!” (*Ibid.*, p 122)

cosmology of Middle-earth is replaced by (not seldom equally strange) names of commercial brands:

In the eastern sky, Velveeta, beloved morning star of the elves and handmaid of dawn, rose and greeted Noxzema, bringer of the flannel tongue, and clanging on her golden garbage pail, bade him make ready the winged rickshaw of Novocaine, herald of the day. Thence came rosy-eyeballed Ovaltine, she of the fluffy mouth and lightly kissed the land east of the Seas. In other words, it was morning. (83)

This is, of course, in large part a comment on the status of *The Lord of the Rings* as a bestseller and cult phenomenon in the late 1960s, when the new paperback occupies a liminal cultural position between commodity and work of art. But the commodification of the cultural object and the use of brand names could also be understood against the vibrant materiality and uncanny agency of things in Middle-earth. Accordingly, it could be argued that by replacing the fantastic objects and names of Middle-earth with brand names, *Bored of the Rings* highlights how brand names to some extent also function as secondary worlds, generating secondary belief as part of a distributed agency. The difference being – presumably – that the brand name and the commodity have a more clearly delineated purpose in capitalist society, where brands and commodities work magic by invasive techniques, while the object of fantasy, hopefully, is an enchanting work of art. However, as discussed earlier, the distinction between art and technique, as well as magic and enchantment, is a difference of degree, not of kind.

Thus when Pepsi and Moxie (the reified Pippin and Merry) meet the parody version of Treebeard, “Birdseye”, a half man, half broccoli figure whose presentation appears as a description of the brand mascot The Jolly Green Giant, the narrative becomes commodity, while at the same time unleashing a seemingly contagious proliferation of produce-based word puns:

‘Sigh not.’ Reassured the giant as he slung the two boggies over his kelly green shoulder blades, ‘being lord of the Vee-Ates is not easy either, particularly in my *celery*. Ho!

The two boggies kicked and screamed, attempting a final escape from the towering bore.

‘Struggle not,’ he said soothingly, ‘I know a couple of peaches that will be just right for your meat-things. You will love them, they are –’

‘ – quite a *pear*,’ muttered Pepsi.

‘Hey,’ burred the giant, ‘that us a *good* one. Wish I had said that!’

‘You will,’ sobbed Moxie, ‘you will.’<sup>365</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid., p 102

The commodity not only becomes an object to be desired and possessed, it also, like a parasite, threatens possession, reproducing desire. *Bored of the Rings* highlights how objects in the media ecology of Middle-earth are imbued with a vibrant materiality, but perhaps more importantly the parody also, by being situated in contemporary culture, shows how *The Lord of the Rings* itself, as a media object, functions as a vibrant thing, an uncanny materiality: commodity as well as a work of art. In the case of *Bored of the Rings* – and most other commercial continuations of Tolkien's work carrying the label parody – the satirical intention is explicit, generally tying the formulas of fantasy fiction to a contemporary consumerist culture.<sup>366</sup>

The parody exemption from immaterial rights evidently also facilitates the commercial publication of continuations in which the satirical intentions are less explicit, if they can be considered satirical at all. Thus a book such as the 2003 *Morlindalë, Song of Illuminate Darkness* – an alternate world version of *The Silmarillion* narrated by and from the perspective of the antagonists Sauron and Melkor – was published as a parody. “The One Ring” is attributed as author, but the copyright is assigned to a Barone of Rachane, which, together with the basic premise of reproducing the narrative in the form of (badly rendered) digitally remediated scrolls – as such, *Morlindalë* is a decidedly less forceful configuration than *Bored of the Rings* – has a bearing on the aesthetics of the media ecology of Middle-earth, focusing on the collaborative and collective as well as the distributed character of experience.

## Russian Tolkien

Several literary continuations of Tolkien's books have been published in post-Soviet Russia. Nick Perumov's trilogy *Ring of Darkness* – the first two books *Elven Blade* and *Black Lance*, published in 1993, and the third, *The Adamant of Henna* in 1995 – is probably the most well known, and Perumov has since published a series of high fantasy novels set in a secondary world of his own creation. *Ring of Darkness* is set in Middle-earth, in the Fourth Age, approximately three hundred years after the events narrated in *The Lord of the Rings*. The Swedish translation of the first book, *Alvklingan* (Figure 26) published in 2011, contains no maps or images pertaining to Middle-earth, but otherwise the setting of the narrative, its geography and history are taken directly from Tolkien's work.

Perumov's books are part of what almost seems to constitute a subgenre within Russian fandom, where several novel-length continuations of Tolkien's work have

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<sup>366</sup> As implied by the title of the BBC radio parody *Hordes of the Things*, by A. P. R. Marshall and J. H. W. Lloyd and aired on BBC 4 on 25 November 1980, as well as by *The Sellamillion* by A.R.R.R. (Adam) Roberts published in 2004.



been commercially published, predominantly during the 1990s.<sup>367</sup> Besides Perumov, the most successful – commercially and critically – of these are *The Black Book of Arda* by N. Vassilyeva & N. Nekrasova, released as a fan-fiction on an online platform in 1992, and published in 1995, and Kiril Yeskov’s *The Last Ringbearer* from 1999 (Figure 26).



Figure 26: N. Kiril Yeskov, *El Último Anillo* (2004), Nick Perumov, *Alvklingen* (2011)

While none of the Russian Middle-earth books have been published in English, Perumov’s first two books have been published in Sweden, and Yeskov’s book is available in Czech, Estonian, Polish, Spanish and Portuguese. An English translation “The Last Ringbearer”, unpublished but approved by Yeskov, is available online.

Both Perumov and Yeskov engage in a political and critical reconfiguration of Tolkien’s Middle-earth. The basic premise of *The Last Ringbearer* is that the narrative as told in *The Lord of the Rings* is a history written by history’s conquerors. The morality of Middle-earth, with its basic and indisputable division of a good and evil side to history, is thus not a historical fact but the outcome of a specific historical discourse. It is – as is made clear in the preface and foreword of *The Lord of the Rings* – contingent on a specific configuration of a historical archive comprising an indeterminate number of potentially relevant objects. *The Last Ringbearer* is narrated from the perspective of the ones conquered by history, in a sense it appears as a postcolonial critique, a history of Middle-earth told by the subjugated and subaltern.

The narrative of *The Last Ringbearer* takes place in roughly the same time period as *The Lord of the Rings*, during the last moments of the Third Age, when the military forces of the West – the alliance of Rohan and Gondor, Elves and Dwarves, Ents and

<sup>367</sup> Ksenia Prassolova writes on Henry Jenkins blog, in 2007, on Russian fan fiction: [http://henryjenkins.org/2007/07/oh\\_those\\_russians\\_the\\_not\\_so\\_m.html](http://henryjenkins.org/2007/07/oh_those_russians_the_not_so_m.html)



Eagles – battle against the forces of Mordor. But rather than as a conflict between the relatively good of the West and the absolute evil of Sauron – as depicted in *The Lord of the Rings* – the political conflict of *The Last Ringbearer* is between the industrialized modernity of Sauron’s Mordor, and the feudal societies dominating the West. Here, Gandalf is mustering the troops of the West – presenting Aragon as the Returned King – not in order to prevent Sauron from covering “all the lands in a second darkness” (51), as told in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, but to avert the inevitable, and magically predicted, invention of nuclear power. In order to thwart the ascension of industrialized modernity and the ensuing threat of nuclear extinction, Gandalf, as head of the White Council, concedes political control to the conserving forces of the Elves, in effect turning Middle-earth into a magically totalitarian state where existence is subjugated to the status quo of an immortal race.

The plot of *The Last Ringbearer* centers on an attempt to forestall this totalitarian regime of Elves. An alliance between representatives of the enlightened and modernized inhabitants of Mordor and some of the peripheral figures of the West – most notably Faramir and Eowyn – comes up with a plan that eventually sees fruition. Mixing the narrative style of the historical novel, fantasy and cold war spy thrillers with science fiction, the conflict between modernity and the archaic is represented in the narration, consistently offering a technological and scientifically plausible explanation of the magic and supernatural creatures of Mordor. Only the magic of the Elves, and the White Council, is still beyond explanation. To this extent, *The Last Ringbearer* is on the one hand faithful to Tolkien’s (albeit misdirected) idea of art and technique, positing a realm of fantasy beyond human cognizance, while on the other hand it insists on a version of the fantastic that largely coincides with the hermeneutic hesitation prescribed by Todorov. The difference here is that the supernatural event provoking hesitation is measured against the consensus reality of Middle-earth. It is thus perfectly natural that *The Last Ringbearer* ends with an epilogue in which the (fictive) sources of narrative are scientifically scrutinized and found unreliable: “Our narrative is based entirely on Tzerlag’s tales, however incomplete, that are preserved by his clan as an oral tradition. It should be stressed that we have no documents that might attest to its veracity.”<sup>368</sup>

In the end, Yeskov’s book is a thought-provoking reformulation of some of the basic tenets of *The Lord of the Rings*. Potentially problematic aspects of colonialism and the latent racism of Tolkien’s work – and heroic fantasy in general – are brought

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<sup>368</sup> 263, pdf of English translation. “Nuestra narración se basa enteramente en los detallados (aunque presentan ciertas lagunas) relatos de Tserleg, los cuales se concervan entre los miembros de su clan en forma de leyenda oral. Es importante subrayar que no disponemos de ninguna clase de documentos que los avalen.” Kiril Yeskov, *El Último Anillo*, trans. Fernando Otero Macías, (Barcelona: Bibliópolis fantástica, 2004), p 433

to the fore. And while at times stylistically insensitive – particularly the spy thriller plotline suffers from a lack of attention to the linguistic details of Middle-earth – the basic assumptions made by the alternative world version of *The Last Ringbearer* are subtly adapted to the conditions for reconfiguration set by the ecological aesthetics of *The Lord of the Rings*. As part of the media ecology of Middle-earth, *The Last Ringbearer* reconfigures *The Lord of the Rings* by evincing how its alternate narrative is already virtually present in Tolkien's book. It highlights how only a slight shift of emphasis within the vast complex of intersecting media systems comprising Middle-earth will in effect constitute a new reassembly of the medium, generating a new secondary world.

It is for that reason no coincidence that *The Last Ringbearer* thematizes the function of media in Middle-earth. Central to overthrowing the extreme feudalism of the totalitarian Elven regime is the function of two of the most prominent magical media devices in Tolkien's creation: the Palantíri and Galadriel's Mirror. A Palantír is a magic crystal sphere (most likely) made by the Elven smith Fëanor in the First Age.<sup>369</sup> The exact number of Palantíri is unknown, but at the end of the Third Age, when the events of both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Last Ringbearer* take place, there seem to be three still in existence, one at Isengard, one in Minas Tirith and one in the hands of Sauron. It functions as a sort of far-seeing stone, displaying images from remote sites. It is not, however, a safe or neutral conduit, receiving images as an undisturbed and unaffected vessel; instead – in *The Lord of the Rings* – the feedback function of the Palantír as a medium is highly emphasized, stressing both the importance of the user and the specific circumstances under which its information is generated. Furthermore, the Palantíri are connected to each other, allowing a multidirectional flow of influence. Likewise, Galadriel's Mirror is a sort of medium of surveillance; it is perhaps even more unstable and sensitive to the environment than the palantíri. Apart from extending in space, Galadriel's mirror has the power of temporal extension, surveying the past as well as the future. Furthermore, it probes potential futures and seems to some extent to partly follow a will of its own:

'Many things I can command the Mirror to reveal,' she [Galadriel] answered, 'and to some I can show what they desire to see. But the Mirror will also show things unbidden, and those are often stranger and more profitable than things which we wish to behold. What you will see, if you leave the Mirror free to work, I cannot tell. For it shows things that were, and things that are, and things that yet may be. But which it is that he sees, even the wisest cannot tell. Do you wish to look?

Frodo did not answer.

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<sup>369</sup> Drout, 2007, p 501

‘And you?’ she said, turning to Sam. ‘For this is what your folk would call magic, I believe; though I do not understand clearly what they mean; and they seem to use the same word of the deceits of the Enemy.’ (362)

Certainly it is no coincidence that Galadriel points here to the untenable distinction between magic and enchantment and art and technique which Tolkien tries to uphold in his essay on fairy-story and fantasy. In Yeskov’s postcolonial version of Middle-earth, the potentially equally intrusive character of ‘Faërian drama’ is further emphasized as the magic powers of surveillance and knowing granted to the Elves are translated into actual political power. Thematising the effects of discursive power and the ontogenesis of media, the configurative textuality of *The Last Ringbearer* emerges as a material enactment of its theme.

In Nick Perumov’s *Ring of Darkness*, the relation between media and ontogenesis is the basic premise of the narrative. Set in the Fourth Age, approximately three hundred years after the war of the Ring, the first book in the trilogy, *Elven Blade*, centers around the adventures of the hobbit Folco Brandybuck and the dwarf Thorin, son of Dart. To a large degree, the story reads as a version of the quixotic picaresque. Folco and Thorin share an unhealthy fascination for stories pertaining to the heroic history of Middle-earth, coupled with an overwhelming sense of living in a time of bland rationality and disenchantment. In particular, it is *The Red Book of Westmarch*, a copy of which is in Folco’s family’s possession, which occupies their attention. Extensively studying the book, and interpreting events unrolling around them against the book, Folco and Thorin set out from the Shire to find adventure, travelling, at the outset, in the tracks of their heroic precursors. Quite soon, of course, the two find what they are looking for. An imbalance in the world is detected, old magics and evils are stirring, with implications to Sauron, the Nazgûls and the Rings of power.

While not having the intention of delivering a postcolonial critique of Tolkien’s secondary world, Perumov’s books problematize morality and the notion of evil in Middle-earth. Having Middle-earth as an already given environment for the narrative, little effort is given to establishing it as a secondary world. Instead, attention can be given to the everyday minutiae of ordinary life, imbuing the narrative with a sense of realism, and as the adventure progresses, the two protagonists are increasingly made aware of the everyday limits of heroic ideals. Relieved from the need to establish Middle-earth as a credible creation – where the realist techniques employed by Tolkien could have the effect, as Christine Brooke-Rose points out, of overdetermination and redundancy – Nick Perumov’s fantasy assumes Middle-earth as part of consensus reality. Eventually a heroic quest emerges, but this quest is, however, at least in part, always tied to a metafictional suspicion that the two protagonists of the quest are the originators of their own destiny.

Aside from the highly emphasized metafictional playfulness dominating *Elven Blade*, the narrative stresses details in the media ecology of Middle-earth where a configurative sympoiesis is particularly salient. Thus the role of the Nazgûls – there is very little information given in the main narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*, some additional in the Appendices and more in the posthumously published material – is further developed by Perumov, as are the Istari, whose function, discussed in the earlier section of this chapter, seem to be precisely that of ecological sympoiesis. But *Elven Blade* also focuses on specific areas where an unstable and heterogeneous depiction in the official narratives influences and invites reconfiguration, such as The Old Forest and the Barrow-downs (both of which will be discussed later on), and the problematic race of the Petty-Dwarves. By inserting the narrative in these – to the main narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* – peripheral and incongruously depicted phenomena, an alternative world version, like that of Yeskov's, is established. This is a method akin to the protocol used for generating fan-fiction, but it is also – and perhaps historically more relevant – a method grounded in the aesthetics of fantasy role-playing games. In fact, developing the temporal and spatial interstices of Tolkien's narratives is precisely how the gaming company Iron Crown Enterprises (ICE) generated their Middle-earth gaming modules; and as an official translation into Russian was not published until the early 1990s, the circulation of these role-playing games played an important role in the Russian reception of Tolkien in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>370</sup>

### **Night of the Nazgûl: the legal limits of play**

Since the publication of *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974 and the popularity and prolific spread of tabletop role-playing games in the late 1970s and early 1980s, role-playing games have had a not insignificant function in the dissemination and production of the market category and emergent genre of fantasy. While this seems an undisputable fact, and many of the books discussed by Brian Attebery as formulaic fantasy are tied to the gaming industry, little attention has hitherto been given to what this implies about the aesthetics of the contemporary fantastic.<sup>371</sup> The influence of literary fantasy – and particularly that of Tolkien's work – on fantasy role-playing games is often taken for granted.<sup>372</sup> The extent to which role-playing games comprise a part

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<sup>370</sup> Mark T. Hooker, *Tolkien Through Russian Eyes* (Zürich: Walking Tree Publishers, 2003), p 17ff

<sup>371</sup> A. P. Canavan argues that closer attention, from a literary perspective, needs to be afforded the function of role-playing games in the history and theory of the fantastic, and particularly of the fantasy genre. See "Calling a sword a sword", in *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, Vol. 24, No 9, 2012

<sup>372</sup> Michael Tresca argues that the basic unit for roleplaying, a group of distinct characters with complementary abilities and character trait, is taken from Tolkien's Fellowship. However, even if the relation is more complex than of direct causality, there is certainly some merit to Tresca's argument. Michael J. Tresca, *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-playing Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007)

of the aesthetics of literary fantasy in general, and Tolkien's work in particular, has, however, not been discussed at length. Péter Kristóf Makai offers a comprised presentation of the relation between Tolkien's work and the evolution of the gaming industry, from the earliest role-playing games in the wake of *Dungeons & Dragons* to computer games in the 2010s. Makai touches briefly on the relation between gaming/playing and the secondary belief of Tolkien's sub-creation, arguing that the secondary world of Faërian drama corresponds to the immersion theorized by game studies: "What Tolkien calls Fantasy, Primary and Secondary Belief, new media theorists call immersion, the psychological phenomenon of immediately experiencing another world in the aesthetic mode"<sup>373</sup> However, Makai's approach comes from the perspective of cognitive narratology and fictional-worlds theory, focusing on an autonomous, albeit extended, mind as the site for cognition.<sup>374</sup> A more relevant approach to agency and participation in relation to role-playing games is presented by David Punday, from the related perspective of possible-worlds theory. Punday argues that role-playing games offer "a very different way of understanding creativity" as the "use of pre-determined statistical rules", and as such offer a mode for understanding how cultural objects – such as texts and genres – are affective and not merely meaningful.<sup>375</sup> However, neither Punday nor Makai would seem to be working with a concept of participation that is completely compatible with them present argument. Nevertheless, ludological adaptations of Tolkien's work have done much to inform the aesthetics of the fantastic. It is here not merely a matter of adapting a literary text into a game format; the adaptation is also provoked by and highlights the presence of an ergodic and participatory textuality in the source text. Clearly, the prominent function of riddles and prophecies – what Nick Montfort has discussed as minimal interactive fictions – in Tolkien and generic fantasy alike indicates such a presence.<sup>376</sup> In the following, a brief look at the *Tolkien Quest* solo role-playing game books (Figure 23), published by ICE, will show how these books are contingent upon the configurative textuality already present in Tolkien's work, while, as ludic adaptations, they facilitate an understanding of the participatory aspects of the aesthetics of Tolkien's work and contemporary fantasy.

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<sup>373</sup> Péter Kristóf Makai, "Games and Gaming: Quantasy", in Stuart D. Lee (ed.), *A Companion to J. R. R. Tolkien* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), p 531

<sup>374</sup> The cognitive approach is elaborated in Péter Kristóf Makai, "Faërian Cyberdrama; When Fantasy becomes Virtual Reality", in *Tolkien Studies*, Vol. 7, 2010, pp 35-53

<sup>375</sup> David Punday, "Creative Accounting: Role-playing Games, Possible-World Theory, and the Agency of Imagination", in *Poetics Today*, 26:1 (Spring 2005), p 124, p 126. Approaching agency and creativity from the perspective of possible-worlds theory, Punday's argument converge on several points with the embodied notion of participation elaborated in this book. However, it could be argued that Punday's argument rests too much on a liberal, humanist notion of subjectivity.

<sup>376</sup> Nick Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages: An approach to interactive fiction* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), p 43f

ICE published the Tolkien Quest adventure game books between 1985 and 1989. Initially, twelve titles were planned, but after the first three books, ICE was forced to cease publication; Tolkien Enterprises, having licensed rights to game adaptations to ICE, considered the adventure books a copyright infringement. The first three titles of the Tolkien Quest series were withdrawn and destroyed, and the fourth title *Murder at Minas Tirith*, planned for February 1986, never reached the stores. After settling the dispute, ICE continued publication with the fifth title *A Spy in Isengard* in 1988, rebranding the series *Middle-earth Quest*, in effect making the fifth title the first in the new series. Lacking commercial success, the series was abandoned with the eighth (or fourth) title *Search for the Palantír* in 1989.

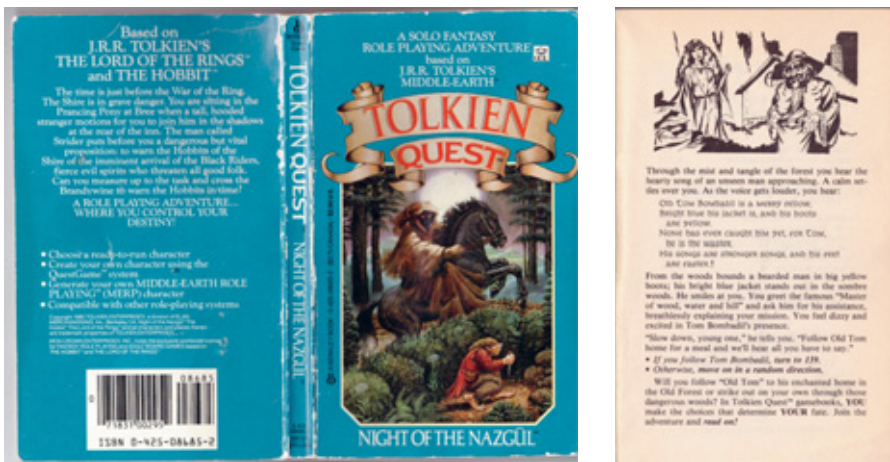


Figure 27: John David Ruemmier, *Tolkien Quest 1: Night of the Nazgûl* (1985), cover and first page

A solo adventure book is structured as a textgame, where the reader/player plays a character that is generated following a set of rules. These rules regulate a set of circumstances relevant for successfully completing the game – health points, resources, weapons, equipment and so on. A textgame consists of a number of textual units that the readers/players connects into a larger text by choosing, from options generated by the game rules, their own path. Depending on the number of textual units and path options, the number of different potential narratives can be considerably large. The textgame forces the players/readers to comply with a distinct trajectory, explicitly emerging as a distributed agency, where the chosen path – the narrative – is both cause and effect of this distribution. Textgames are thus cybertexts, distinguished by the non-trivial effort of traversal. The participatory aesthetics of the textgame is not merely a matter of taking part in a cybertext. The narrative temporality of a textgame is uncanny, having begun – by grounding the experience in the body of the reader



– before its time, before the time of the narration. And as such, the textgame presupposes a notion of subjectivity and agency as distributed.

*Night of the Nazgûl*, the first book in the Tolkien Quest series, using a simplified version of the Middle-earth Role-playing Game (MERP) rules, but also compatible with MERP, is set within the same timeframe as *The Lord of the Rings*. The prologue of the game, comprising the largest unit of text, extending over four pages, puts the reader/player into well-known territory: the Prancing Pony in Bree, where Aragorn instructs the reader/player to warn the citizens of the Shire of the immanent arrival of the Black Riders. The main objective of the game is to reach the Shire in time.

Accompanying the book is a map of the area surrounding Bree, structured as a hexagonal grid. The goal is to reach Hobbiton in the farthest west. The player moves through the grid while reading the corresponding units of text. Sometimes these units will open up a number of other textual units, decided upon by the player either by choice, or randomly generated. As the player reads these units, the map is traversed. Along the way, figures familiar from *The Lord of the Rings* are situated as possible encounters. These encounters, particularly meeting Tom Bombadil in the Old Forest – incorporating verses from the books – the harrowing Barrow-wights of the Barrow-downs and the encounter with Gildor Inglorion on the fields near Hobbiton, rely heavily on the source text in *The Lord of the Rings* (Figure 28).



Figure 28: *Night of the Nazgûl*, map and spread featuring verses from Tom Bombadil's song to the Barrow-wight, from *Lord of the Rings* (142)



The narrative of *Night of the Nazgûl* is a matter of spatial as well as temporal extension. Different media systems as well as different regimes of attention are employed when traversing the book. Among the most salient examples are the recursive loops in which the player at times is caught. Here, the random selected numbers, inserted into the system of the rules of the game, can enforce a circular movement, a movement from which only death – that of the character or that of the reader – can offer deliverance. Thus the map and the hypertext stress the limits of experience rather



than – as an ideal linear textual sequence does – suggesting a totality of information. Confronted with an exteriority that cannot be internalized, that is present but cannot be appropriated, it simply takes part, participates in a perception-event.

This experience of exteriority is what Aarseth describes as hypertext aporia: “In contrast to the aporias experienced in codex literature, where we are not able to make sense of a particular part even though we have access to the whole text, the hypertext aporia prevents us from making sense of the whole because we do not have access to a particular part.”<sup>377</sup> Aarseth posits the relation between aporia and epiphany in hypertexts as the basis for ergodicity, as an experience that precedes narrative structuring, whose only possible solution demands a non-trivial effort.<sup>378</sup> However, if configurative textuality is to be used as a critical tool, as Ian Bogost suggests, and as ergodicity is used in the related notion of configurative textuality, ergodic literature cannot, as seems to be implied by Aarseth’s notion of hypertext aporia, be treated as a whole. The notion of a metaphysical totality is in fact what is contested by the sympoiesis of configurative textuality. *Night of the Nazgûl* – and other ludological adaptations of Tolkien’s narratives – underscores a central tenet of a media-ecological understanding of the fantastic: that the enchantment of a secondary world always already presupposes the distributed subjectivity of magic. Reading fantasy is always already playing.

## 5. Vibrant matter: Books, Rings and Things

It is perhaps intrinsic to the form that the media-ecological sympoiesis of Middle-earth is particularly salient in the posthumous publications of the *Legendarium*. As compilations of unpublished material, the traces of configurative textuality – even when, as with *The Children of Húrin*, the intention is to minimize editorial presence – are an indication of the material circumstances and the cultural environment in which the books are produced. And as posthumous compilations, products of a collaborative creativity, edited and in no insignificant part, as the previous section indicated, written by people other than J. R. R. Tolkien, these books do not work with a notion of literature wholly compliant to that of liberal humanist ideals. Concerning the books published during Tolkien’s lifetime, this is a different matter; here, the participatory aesthetics put in motion by Tolkien’s mythic method establishes to a higher degree a tension within the work between ecological sympoiesis and hermeneutical autonomy.

The following section will concentrate on how ecological sympoiesis appears in the three printed books comprising *The Lord of the Rings*. The different editions of

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<sup>377</sup> Aarseth, 1997, p 91

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*, p 92

these books notwithstanding – and there have been many editions of these books produced, even not taking translations into consideration – there exists, compared to the posthumously published material, a relatively stable and properly authorized version of the text. The early draft versions of *The Lord of the Rings* published in Volumes 6-9 of *The History of Middle-earth* do not – to the same extent as the versions of the “The Silmarillion” or “The Children of Húrin” – indicate a necessity to treat the materiality of the trilogy as a fluid textuality. Nonetheless, the aesthetic appeal of these three books, and the key to understanding both their extended commercial success and their central role in the formation of the contemporary fantasy genre, hinges on the way in which they interrupt and intersperse the narrative genre of the (realist) novel with media-ecological sympoiesis. These interruptions are what generate the sense of historical depth repeatedly emphasized by Tolkien studies, functioning as sites for participation and distributed cognition, traces of adaptation that provoke further adaptation. The dissemination of Tolkien’s work into new forms of expression – fan-art and fan-fiction as well as transmedia networks – can thus be tied to a particular aesthetic function of *The Lord of the Rings*, stressing participation over interpretation, ontogenesis over ontology. This is an aesthetics that concerns the agency of things, as has been repeated throughout this chapter, Tolkien’s sub-creation ceases to be narrative and becomes world, just as the names of the blue wizards are things that become names, through the sympoiesis of a distributed subjectivity. The following discussion will highlight three instances when this comes to pass: the first concerns the function of books, the second charts the influence of rings and the third looks at the tension between names and things.

### **Balin’s Tomb: the materiality of the book**

The narratives of Middle-earth are presented as versions of historical events framed by a series of threshold situations. These thresholds all point to the material circumstances under which the narrative is generated, situating the narrative as part of a material environment, whether the fictive manuscript of *The Red Book of Westmarch*, the practice of philology and translation or the oral storytelling of “The Lost Road” and “The Notion Club Papers”, posthumously published in *The History of Middle-earth*. The most notable of these thresholds is arguably the two forewords to *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

In the foreword to the second edition of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tolkien discusses the circumstances of the genesis of the book, attributing its long gestation mainly to the attention demanded by “the older matter” (p xx) of the *Legendarium*. The many obligations of his profession and the outbreak of war in 1939 are also mentioned as relevant factors in the delay. The tone is deferential and apologetic, playing down the authorial agency and responsibility of the writer as creator of the

work. Rather than as the originator of the narrative, Tolkien is presented as submersed in the narrative, physically engaged in the world of Middle-earth. “In spite of the darkness of the next five years I found that the story could not now be wholly abandoned, and I plodded on, mostly by night, till I stood by Balin’s tomb in Moria. There I halted for a long time. It was almost a year later when I went on and so came to Lothlórien and the Great River late in 1941.”

Presenting the creation of a fictional world as a spatial endeavor is largely in line with a culturally established use of the notion of the road and travelling as metaphors for extended (human) effort. But whereas the metaphor’s extension is temporal, an effort prolonged over time – and clearly Tolkien is partly referring to a temporal extension – circumstances here also point to a spatial extension. Tolkien has not only been working on the narrative for a long time, claiming that “[i]t was begun soon after *The Hobbit* was written and before its publication in 1937”; he is also, at this point, immersed in material artifacts indicating the spatial extension of Balin’s tomb.

Some of these artifacts had been referred to in the foreword to the first edition of 1954, where Tolkien had presented the book as “drawn for the most part from the memoirs of the renowned Hobbits, Bilbo and Frodo, as they are preserved in *The Red Book of Westmarch*” and supplemented by “information derived from the surviving records of Gondor”. The narrative is thus to be understood as a translation and a compilation put together by an editor and translator, immersed in the historical documents of the Gondorian archives.

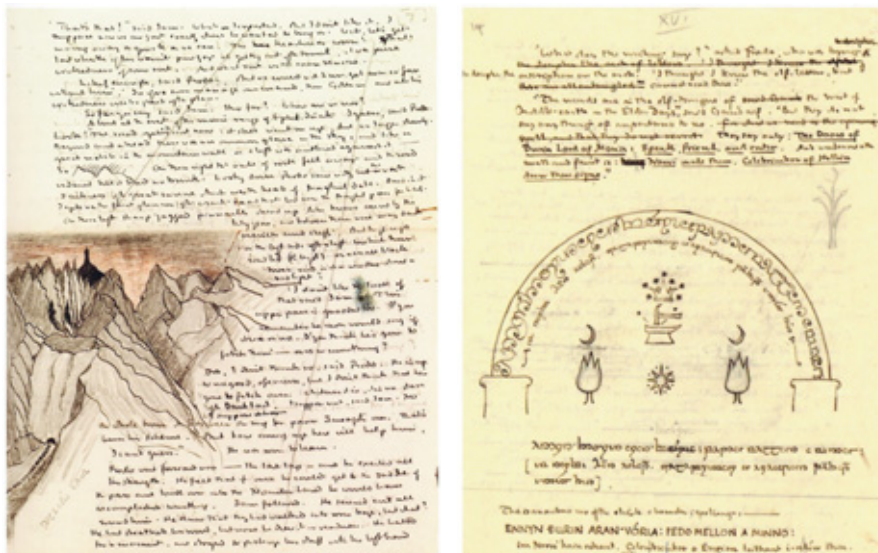


Figure 29: Manuscript pages “Shelob’s Lair” and “Gates of Moria”, Wayne G. Hammond & Christina Scull, *The Art of The Lord of the Rings* (New York: Houghton Miffling Harcourt, 2015)

This metafictional game is in no way original to Tolkien. Numerous works of literary fantasy have attributed their narratives to sources exterior to the fiction. Nevertheless, Tolkien also indicates here an environment of intersecting agencies where, at the time of writing the final version of *The Lord of the Rings*, he finds himself immersed in an immense number of diverse objects pertaining to the creation of Middle-earth. The Gondorian archives and *The Red Book of Westmarch* are not merely objects within a fictional story world. At the time of compiling the final version of *The Lord of the Rings*, they have an actual, physical presence. His manuscript pages, as Christopher Tolkien describes repeatedly, are full of corrections, alternate versions but also designs and illustrations (Figure 29). The foreword functions as a threshold, not merely into the temporal extension of a narrative but also – and perhaps more importantly – into the spatial extension of a game. In a sense, it is a reminder of the presence of the material involved in the genesis of the book. Balin’s tomb is not to be understood as a waypoint in the unfolding narration of a particular story; rather, it is an actual site, whose physical presence is palpable. Coming to the end of Chapter 5 of Book 2, the reader of *The Fellowship of the Ring* is confronted – and halted – by Balin’s tomb (Figure 30).

“It looks like a tomb’, muttered Frodo, and bent forwards with a curious sense of foreboding, to look more closely at it. Gandalf came quickly to his side. On the slab runes were deeply graven:” (319)

Figure 30: J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, image from first edition, 1954



The runes, Gandalf informs the reader, are “Daeron’s Runes” and translate into “BALIN SON OF FUNDIN LORD OF MORIA” (334). However, prior to being translated, the runes framed at the bottom of the page, an invention proper to Tolkien, are illegible, alien, not belonging to any language known to this world. In a sense, the runes function not only as a representation of the inscription; they *are* the inscription, generating the material presence of the tomb at which the temporal extension of the narration is halted. There simply is no way to read this passage without transforming its reader into part of the alien world in which it belongs, and as such, the inscription does not impose a narratological or hermeneutic disposition on its

reader but rather a participatory one. All that is left is to turn the page, physically taking part in the construction of Middle-earth, becoming the site at which narrative unfolds.

The inscription on Balin's tomb enforces a non-hermeneutical attitude towards Tolkien's work, an attitude which, as mentioned earlier, Tolkien insists on in the 1954 foreword: "As for any inner meaning or 'message', it [*The Lord of the Rings*] has in the intention of the author none. It is neither allegorical nor topical. As the story grew it put down roots (into the past) and threw out unexpected branches: but its main theme was settled from the outset by the inevitable choice of the Ring as the link between it and *The Hobbit*." (xxi) The phrasing is curious. That Sauron's ring is an object invested with immense power, wielding a supernatural agency of its own, is unquestioningly one of the bearing themes of the narrative. The Ring of Power is a thing that is also more than a thing; questioning, perhaps even transgressing, the subject-object boundary, it encapsulates the distributed agency of a quasi-object. Within the fictional story world of Middle-earth, that is. Here, however, it would appear that Tolkien attributes the Ring creative agency outside the confines of the narration.

### **The Book of Mazarbul: ontogenesis in the Chamber of Records**

In the foreword to the second edition of *Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien discusses his creation of the secondary world of Middle-earth in terms of spatiality and physical effort, stating, as noted earlier: "I plodded on, mostly by night, till I stood by Balin's tomb in Moria. There I halted for a long time." Within the media ecology of Middle-earth, the physical site specificity of Balin's tomb does not merely metonymically refer to a distinct stage in the chronology of the narrative, or even to a specific page in its manuscript form. As indicated by the represented inscription discussed briefly earlier, certain aspects of the tomb's materiality are made present within the narrative: the inscription becomes a material aporia, an imposing and enigmatic presence, devoid of meaning, whose only possible solution entails a physical engagement by the reader, touching, as it were, the very inscription which is to be translated by Gandalf on the next page, divulging and divesting the stone of its meaning. Prior to this translation, by which the materiality of the inscription in fact becomes inscription, emerging for the first time as signs in a semiotic system, the only way to handle the panel containing Daeron's Runes at the bottom of the page is by adhering to the rules of the game and turning the page, either to the following page, or, if one has the inclination, to Appendix E, where the different runic alphabets of Middle-earth are discussed at some length.

This is, certainly, nothing less than a description of the physical process of reading a book, of the act of reading as an embodied experience: the reader is engaged

in turning pages. Nevertheless, the incursion of “Daeron’s Runes” at this point in the narrative, at a point where the author himself claims to have been standing for more than a year, is a forcible reminder of the cybernetic experience of reading, the feedback loops between systems and environments. It is perhaps no surprise then that as the Fellowship, in the opening of Chapter 5 “The Bridge of Khazad-Dûm”, searches the room, they too encounter a book.

There were many recesses cut in the rock of the walls, and in them were large iron-bound chests of wood. All had been broken and plundered; but beside the shattered lid of one there lay the remains of a book. It had been slashed and stabbed and partly burned, and it was so stained with black and other dark marks like old blood that little of it could be read. Gandalf lifted it carefully, but the leaves cracked and broke as he laid it on the slab. He pored over it for some time without speaking. Frodo and Gimli standing at his side could see, as he gingerly turned the leaves, that they were written by many different hands, in runes, both of Moria and of Dale, and here and there in Elvish script. (321)

The book that has caught Gandalf’s attention is known as the Book of Mazarbul, named after the dwarvish name of the Chamber of Records – the Chamber of Mazarbul – in which Balin’s tomb and the book are encountered. The book as it is represented in *The Fellowship of the Ring* reads as a representation of the material diversity of the media ecology of *The Lord of the Rings*, a manuscript record penned in several different hands in several different languages and alphabets. Gandalf’s reading of the Book of Mazarbul coincides temporally with the action, immediate with unfolding events. The deteriorated condition of the manuscript poses a problem; torn and broken, its materiality resist interpretation:

Gandalf paused and set a few leaves aside. ‘There are several pages of the same sort, rather hastily written and much damaged,’ he said; ‘but I can make little of them in this light. Now there must be a number of leaves missing, because they begin to be numbered *five*, the fifth year of the colony I suppose. Let me see! No, they are too cut and stained; I cannot read them. We might do better in the sunlight. Wait! Here is something: a large bold hand using an Elvish script.’

As Gandalf simultaneously interprets, translates and reads the manuscript out loud, the historical temporality of the fictive document is interlaced with the narration. A voice from the past rises, channeled through the wizard, and as such, the scene functions both as a reminder of the fictional historicity of Middle-earth, interlacing different languages and alphabets, and as a moment of hypermediacy, drawing attention to the different layers of mediation in which the narrative unfolds. Furthermore,



from the apparent difficulty with which Gandalf reads the document it becomes clear that even he, who functions as one of the foremost adjuvants of the narration, revealing the real history of events, cannot but reconfigure an approximation of the events therein, complaining: “The remainder of the page is so blurred that I can hardly make anything out, but I think I can read *we have barred the gates*, and then *can hold them long if*, and then perhaps *horrible and suffer*.” (322)

The fragmented materiality of the Book of Mazarbul forces Gandalf to reconstruct the narrative, conjecturing and configuring a text from disparate languages and what apparently seem to be illegible or semi-illegible handwritings. In the light of Tolkien’s statements in the foreword to the second edition, it is not farfetched to read the scene in the Chamber of Records as an allegory of the scene of writing. It is an interpretation that is further strengthened by the different versions of the manuscript published in volumes VI-IX of *The History of Middle-earth*, whose material fluidity, as previously noted, becomes salient in the configurative textuality of *The Lord of the Rings*. In a sense, just as Tolkien collates and configures his narrative from several different versions, Gandalf, in the Chamber of Records, reorders a narrative from a series of fragments. Thus the non-arbitrary involvement on Gandalf’s part in the construction of the narrative when confronted with illegible fragments corresponds to the involvement forced upon the reader by the (represented) materiality of Balin’s tomb.

Unlike the inscription on Balin’s tomb, however, the Book of Mazarbul is not materially presented in the narrative. Nevertheless, the representation of the materiality of the book takes on an ekphrastic character, not merely in the sense that the description extends the representational aspects of the object at hand, but more importantly because it seems to react to and convey a distinct vividness in the object, its enargeia. The Book of Mazarbul is clearly grounded in an environment, affected by the room – its lack of proper light – and in turn itself having an impact on its surroundings, provoking a sudden physical reaction in its attentive reader, Gandalf exclaiming, “Wait!” when coming upon a certain passage.

The section that follows tells of the fate of Balin:

“The first clear word is *sorrow*, but the rest of the line is lost, unless it ends in *ester*. Yes, it must be *yestre* followed by *day being the tenth of novembre Balin lord of Moria fell in Dimrill Dale. He went alone to look in Mirror mere. an orc shot him from behind a stone. We slew the orc, but many more... up from east the Silverlode*. The remainder of the page is so blurred that I can hardly make anything out, but I think I can read *we have barred the gates*, and then *can hold them long if*, and then perhaps *horrible and suffer*. Poor Balin! (322)



The violence and death described in the passage are conveyed not only by the words written on the page but also by the deteriorated and mishandled remains of the manuscript, bloodstained, burnt and broken. On the one hand, the materiality of the Book of Mazarbul, as a historical document, provokes the configuration of a narrative, forcing its reader to filter out a signal amongst the noise and rubble of its immediate environment. As a historical document it must contain a narrative, albeit in the form of a chronicle. On the other hand, it is the very noise and rubble that is conveyed, the deteriorated and violently mishandled corporeality of the book. And as such, its presence weighs down on the narrative as massively as the “great slab of white stone” (319) of Balin’s tomb. The book has an impact on its environment, both as a container of textual meaning and as a material artifact, traversing the internal-external division of humanist subjectivity.

### **The Book of Mazarbul facsimiles**

During the time that elapsed from when Tolkien first found himself standing by Balin’s tomb in the first version of the manuscript – in its third phase as published by Christopher Tolkien in *The History of Middle-earth VI* – presumably in late 1939, until the final publication of the book in 1954 several facsimile versions of The Book of Mazarbul were made.<sup>379</sup> Tolkien’s initial intention was to publish facsimiles of the three pages Gandalf finds in the Chamber of Record, and he had labored over a long period with the design and layout of these three pages, drawing images of the pages on paper (Figure 31). By 1953 he had produced actual facsimiles of the pages (Figure 32), “made (in ink, coloured pencils, and watercolours on grey or yellow paper) as if they were the artefacts themselves: they are genuinely cut, torn, ‘bloodied’, and burned, and have ‘binding holes’ stabbed along the edge”.<sup>380</sup> It is the traces of the materiality of these artifacts in facsimile that are operative in Gandalf’s discourse, affecting the vividness – the energeia – of his ekphrastic descriptions.

As the reproductions of the facsimiles were dropped in the final production stages of *The Fellowship of Ring*, evidently due to production costs, Tolkien wrote to his publisher, lamenting their disappearance and arguing against a reproduction in line-blocks. The media specific materiality of the facsimiles is emphasized as decisive: “The text as it stands is rather pointless without them”, Tolkien states.<sup>381</sup> And later, after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, in response to a reader inquiry, he adds

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<sup>379</sup> Christopher Tolkien, *The History of Middle-earth VI: The Return of the Shadow* (London: HarperCollins, 2002) p 309f

<sup>380</sup> Wayne G. Hammond & Christina Scull, *The Art of The Lord of the Rings* (New York: Houghton Miffling Harcourt, 2015), 77f

<sup>381</sup> Carpenter, 2000, p 170



Figure 31: Left: “Book of Mazarbul” (first page, first version); right: “Book of Mazarbul” (first page, second version), Wayne G. Hammond & Christina Scull, *The Art of The Lord of the Rings* (New York: Houghton Miffling Harcourt, 2015) p 78-79



Figure 32: Left: “The Book of Mazarbul”, page 1; right: “The Book of Mazarbul”, page 2, Wayne G. Hammond & Christina Scull, *The Art of The Lord of the Rings* (New York: Houghton Miffling Harcourt, 2015) p 78-79

that not only does the omission of the facsimiles render the opening of Chapter 5 “defective”, but so also the inclusion of the runes in the appendices is made “unnecessary”. The facsimiles were intended to be reproduced in their original form, alongside a transcription, making them accessible to interpretation with the help of the appendices, while at the same time producing the material resistance of the deteriorated pages. Clearly, Tolkien envisioned the use of the facsimiles as integrated with the text and the appendices, generating a reading that moves between different materialities, alphabets, languages and textual objects.<sup>382</sup>

Reproductions of the Book of Mazarbul were not made until after Tolkien’s death; nevertheless, the complex media environment envisioned by Tolkien can be traced in the published text. Gandalf simultaneously describes the materiality of the book and is caught up in its narrative, conflating two levels of narration, subsequently hinting at the material presence of the manuscript. Configuring a narrative from the fragments of the Book of Mazarbul Gandalf vicariously functions as the voice of its author. Coming to the last page of the tattered book, the writing becomes proleptic, metaleptically prefiguring events to come, in a sense turning Gandalf into the author of his own destruction. The participation of the reader in the creation of the narrative, although not enmeshed in the environment as envisioned by Tolkien, is nevertheless explicitly emphasized.

Poor Balin! He seems to have kept the title that he took for less than five years. I wonder what happened afterwards; but there is no time to puzzle out the last few pages. Here is the last page of all’ He paused and sighed.

‘It’s grim reading,’ he said. ‘I fear their end was cruel. Listen! *We cannot get out. They have taken the bridge and second hall. Frár and Lóni and Náli fell there.* There are four lines smeared so that I can only read *went 5 days ago.* The last lines run *the pool is up to the wall at Westgate. The Watcher in the Water took Óin. We cannot get out. The end comes and then drums, drums in the deep.* I wonder what that means. The last thing written is in a trailing scrawl of elf-letters: *they are coming.* There is nothing more. Gandalf paused and stood in silent thought. (322)

Speaking to his audience in the Chamber of Records, Gandalf, overly pedagogical perhaps, speaks also to the reader; in fact, it could be argued that he explicitly instructs the reader to ponder the meaning of the drums, a meaning that will shortly

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<sup>382</sup> Tolkien later regretted using English as a base for the translation of the runes of the Book of Mazarbul, since if the facsimiles were to be true artifacts, the parts not written in the dwarvish tongue Khuzdûl would have been in the Common Tongue, Westrone, and not in its primary world counterpart English. “Of Dwarves and Men”, in Christopher Tolkien, *The History of Middle-earth XII: The Peoples of Middle-earth* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), p 295

be revealed. The address is nigh on metaleptic, on the verge of putting Gandalf on a par with the reader. Attention is directed towards the hermeneutics of the drums. Certainly, Gandalf is playing the fool here, merely toying, trying to lure the reader into a game. For isn't it quite clear what the drums mean? This is no sustained epistemological ambiguity. The drums do not denote a gap in the narrative as in the hermeneutics of Iser's reader-response theory; their meaning is manifest, metonymically denoting the orcs of the mountain, a synecdoche for the violence of war, the very same violence whose cuts and bloody imprints have rendered parts of the Book of Mazarbul illegible. Gandalf does not call attention to a game of hermeneutics. The meaning of the drums is not a question of interpretation. They mark the coming of the end, the breakdown of discourse. And as such, they hint at a material participation in the configuration of the narrative. In the Chamber of Records the different levels of the narration become porous, Gandalf assuming the part of narrator as well as reader and playfully occupying the position of implied reader whose hesitation is so important in Todorov's analysis of the fantastic. But rather than implying a fantastically ambiguous quality to the textual object, teetering between interpretations, it is the levels of narration that have become indeterminate. As has been repeatedly stated; in the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic the notion of an implied reader is just another metaphysical fallacy: the only reader that matters is the one enveloped in the perception-event of a distributed cognition.

At any rate, Gandalf's ontological and narratological ambiguity is but momentary. He soon gathers his composure and takes control of the fellowship again, calling out instructions about where to head next. The return to the heroic form of the narrative, with Gandalf conforming to its generic rules, is brought to a halt, however, by the sudden sensual presence of the drums: a sonic boom metaleptically transgressing the levels of narration.

[T]here came a great noise: a rolling *Boom* that seemed to come from the depths far below, and to tremble in the stone at their feet. They sprang towards the door in alarm. *Doom, doom* it rolled again, as if huge hands were turning the very caverns of Moria into a vast drum. Then there came an echoing blast: a great horn was blown in the hall, and answering horns and harsh cries were heard further off. There was a hurrying sound of many feet.

'They are coming!' cried Legolas.

'We cannot get out,' said Gimli.

'Trapped!' cried Gandalf. 'Why did I delay? Here we are, caught, just as they were before. But I was not here then. We will see what---'

*Doom, doom* came the drum-beat and the walls shook. (323)

The ominous transformation of the sound of the drums is significant. This is of course what they mean. Doom. Nothing is implied; all is explicit, even to the degree that the drums speak their name. The drums signal the downfall of Gandalf, interrupting his discourse in mid sentence. And as this new, proleptic meaning subsumes the onomatopoeic, initial boom of the drums, yet another metalepsis threatens the stability of the narration. For who but Gandalf can hear the drums speak their name? Gandalf, who once again, it would appear, occupies – invades, and plays the part of – the role of reader.

### **Fantastic ekphrasis: mingled senses in The Chamber of Records**

The Chamber of Records highlights the material aspects of adaptation, showing that adaptation and sympoietic configuration in the media ecology of Middle-earth is not merely a question of retextualisation as in Nagy's analysis – not as long textual analysis focuses on textual content. Instead, ecological sympoiesis is also always grounded in specific material circumstances, also always focusing on the situatedness of experience, the production of presence as much as the production of meaning. In the Chamber of Records this comes to pass precisely by enforcing the medium of experience as an ecology of media. Gandalf's ekphrastic narration generates the presence of a vivid description – a description marked by *enargeia* – by stressing how every medium mixes media and mingles bodies, to paraphrase Serres and Mitchell. But in order to focus on media as mixed media, a radically immanent notion of media needs to be employed. The importance Tolkien confers on the facsimiles of The Book of Mazurbul, without which the printed text would be “rather pointless”, testifies to the way different modes and materialities of presentation are integral to his notion of sub-creative art. In The Chamber of Records an array of different objects is put in relation to an emerging subjectivity. These objects all affect the precise nature of the experience generated, albeit not to the same extent. As the facsimiles of the Book of Mazurbul indicate, the medium of the book is not a stable medium, functioning as a transcendental system of meaning-making or a conduit conveying a given message. Rather the book – as it is represented in the narrative, but also as a made object, in the material presence of Tolkien's facsimiles – functions as a system-environment hybrid, generating that very environment from which its organization emerges.

Evidently the adaptations of the narratives of Middle-earth affect how these narratives are perceived and how they produce meaning: as systems in an operationally ajar feedback to an environment they comprise, as is argued throughout this chapter, the media ecology of Middle-earth. However, here the facsimiles also exemplify how Tolkien's creative process from the very beginning had been engaged in the materiality of different media, and more precisely in an ecology of media. Traces of

oral narrative – whether in the form of actual adaptation from verse forms or merely alluding to adaptation – play an important role in his mythic method, as noted by Gergely Nagy. And as Wayne Hammond and Christina Scull have made abundantly clear in their research and their scholarly editions of Tolkien's art and illustration, Tolkien provided illustrations not only to the first edition of *The Hobbit*; he had been working with images in the construction of his legendarium all along. And even though he claims in "On Fairy-Stories" that fantasy is preeminently a narrative art, it is evident that the exact relation between Tolkien's writing and his art and illustration – where page design and calligraphy play an important part – are much more complex. The illustrations made by Tolkien are deeply integrated with his aesthetics, which Book of Mazarbul is an eminent example of, as are – to be discussed shortly – the maps and the depiction of Sauron's ring. Looking at manuscript pages, there are several examples where Tolkien's handwriting is interspersed with illustrations, often in the form of landscapes and maps. While there are several examples of an ekphrastic relation between specific images and narrative episodes, for example the illustrations of Nargothrond and "The Hill: Hobbiton across the water", where the narrative seems to have evolved, in part at least, as a description of the image, it is nevertheless difficult to ascertain the exact function of these different objects in Tolkien's creative process.<sup>383</sup> It does, however, seem to indicate how a notion of the fantastic as an emergent sensorium is operative not only in the popular dissemination of adaptations but also in the very aesthetics of sub-creation. The narratives of the media ecology of Middle-earth are configured not merely from different textual units but also from different materialities. Illustration, art, calligraphy and book design are but a few of the objects whose arrangement constitutes the affordances of the medium at any given moment.

As the encroaching boom of the drums transforms into Gandalf's impending doom, the Chamber of Records emerges as the sensorium of a distributed cognition. Here, the secondary belief of Tolkien's art of sub-creation is grounded in the corporeal participation in the materiality of the book, in a sympoietic configuring of the narrative. And here too the materiality of the onomatopoeic *Boom* is operative, transgressing borders, turning the very Chamber of Mazarbul into an enveloping, sonorous medium, encompassing not only the fellowship or Tolkien himself, having plodded along for years until reaching Balin's tomb, but also – as the metaleptic transformations of Gandalf indicate – the sensual apparatus of all bodies who dare

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<sup>383</sup> Wayne G. Hammond, Christina Scull, *J. R. R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator* (Boston; Houghton Mifflin, 2000), pp 60-61, pp 100-107, "When Tolkien came to write the Lord of the Rings and returned to Hobbiton for his initial setting, he also returned to this picture. Details not described in *The Hobbit* now appear in its sequel," Wayne C. Hammond, Christina Scull *The Art of the Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 2015), p 19



enter, whatever their biotechnical constitution. As the drums echo, they oscillate between the naked materiality of sound waves bearing down upon the body and the prescient revelation of impending doom: “[d]oom, boom, doom went the drums in the deep” (324). Migrating materialities, they are objects of fantasy, swirling incessantly between things and names.

And as has already been repeatedly noted throughout this chapter, there exists one thing that perhaps like no other object within the media ecology of Middle-earth is characterized by this itinerant and incessant migration; and that thing is, of course, the Ring, into whose gravity this lengthy exposition has finally been pulled.

### **The Ring is the thing: material agency**

The nature of Bilbo’s Ring changes as the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* evolves. Looking at the early draft versions published by Christopher Tolkien in *The History of Middle-earth*, the character of the Ring transforms from the relatively harmless magical trinket in the initial phase into the tremendous artifact of the last phase. Bilbo’s Ring becomes Sauron’s Ring. In order to account for these changes in the nature of the Ring, Tolkien is obliged to re-write Chapter 5 of *The Hobbit*, although not even this effort achieves the intended alignment of the narrative. Thus the evolving character of the Ring affects not only the work at hand, during its composition, but also the previous work, enforcing a reconfiguration of the narrative, a re-writing of the already published book. Comparing the different editions of *The Hobbit* and looking at the posthumously published drafts of *The Lord of the Rings*, the ambiguous nature of the Ring becomes perfectly clear. But the changing status of the Ring also leaves traces in the published narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*. If it were not so, it would probably not have left such a decisive mark on the reception of the work. The fluid textuality of a narrative in manuscript is largely inherent in the manuscript form. Accordingly, it is perfectly understandable that the agency of the Ring described by Tolkien in his foreword to the second edition, forcing the narrative into shoots and branches can be traced through the posthumously published material. However, the Ring is also inconsistently represented in *The Lord of the Rings*, precisely because it is a thing with agency. In a sense, then, the narrative of the *Lord of the Rings* never really breaks free from its ekphrastic relationship to the dust jacket of the first edition. As much as *The Lord of the Rings* is a compilation of material found in the archives of Gondor and of the versions of *The Red Book of Westmarch*, as well as material and draft versions accrued by Tolkien over the years, it is also a tale told by a thing. The thing is the Ring. And as is made abundantly clear by the first edition dust jacket, designed and drawn by Tolkien himself, the Ring is also *the lord* of the rings: it is the very surface upon which the book is writ (Figure 33).



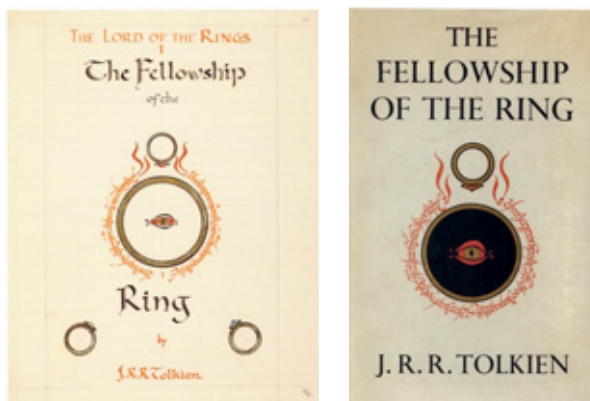


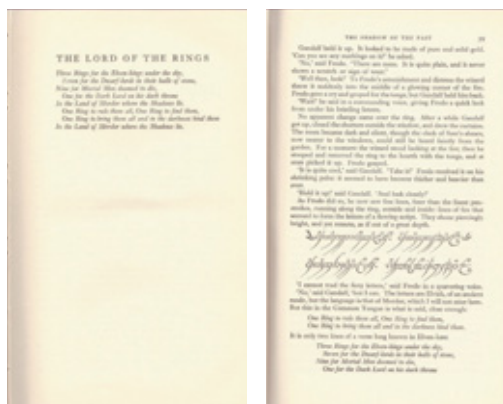
Figure 33: Trial for dust jacket (left), published dust jacket, first edition (right)

## The Eye in the Ring: media mixtures and mingled bodies

Matters are, however, more complicated. The Ring, as is well known, does not reveal its writing easily. First of all, it is entangled in the opening verse, printed on the cover page of all three books. The verse remains the same, framing the narrative, summation and prophecy alike, proleptic and analeptic. From the verse the narrative emerges and vice versa. This generic entanglement is complicated by a linguistic one; the verse, once again, as is well known, is merely a translation of a verse in the dark language of Sauron, originally written in the Black Speech (Figure 34) – and although it could be argued that all of Tolkien's writings pertaining to Middle-earth are translations, the Ring presents an exception.

Figure 34: Cover page with ring verse (left), verse on ring represented in the text (left), J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954), first edition

The writing on the Ring is represented within the narrative, printed in the book as well as on the dust covers. Much as with the runes on Balin's tomb, the writing of the Ring is presented as a material presence, as an interruption in the narrative, as speech without words, a saying without a said. Unlike the runes on Balin's tomb, however, the writing of the ring does not come accompanied with an alphabet in



the appendix. It needs, once again, a translator, in the shape of Gandalf. But more than that, the verse of the Ring, the verse written on the Ring – and according to Gandalf there are only two lines of eight actually engraved on the surface of the Ring – emerges only under specific atmospheric circumstances. Only when exposed to the heat of fire does the Ring give its writing; otherwise unaffected, it is as if the very writing subsumes this elemental force, an animated, luminescent script.

For a moment the wizard stood looking at the fire; then he stooped and picked it up. Frodo gasped.

‘It is quite cool,’ said Gandalf. ‘Take it!’ Frodo received it on his shrinking palm: it seemed to have become thicker and heavier than ever.

‘Hold it up!’ said Gandalf. ‘And look closely!’

As Frodo did so, he now saw fine lines, finer than the finest penstrokes, running along the ring, outside and inside: lines of fire that seemed to form the letters of a flowing script. They shone piercingly bright, and yet remote, as of out of a great depth.

[...] <sup>384</sup>

‘I cannot read the fiery letters,’ said Frodo in a quavering voice.

‘No,’ said Gandalf, ‘but I can. The letters are Elvish, of an ancient mode, but the language is that of Mordor, which I will not utter here. But this is in the Common Tongue what is said, close enough:

*One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,  
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them.* (50)

The verse, even when translated by Gandalf, retains its material opacity; situated within, it is still exterior to the narrative. Rather than communicating by revealing a certain truth or meaning, Sauron’s Ring affects the body (and the body of text); it has a distinct and uncanny materiality, a weight that bears upon the narrative throughout the whole of *The Lord of the Rings*, always a lurking presence threatening to break through, threatening with excommunication, forever upholding the exteriority of language.

In a number of scenes in the trilogy this presence is made particularly manifest. One such scene is undoubtedly the episode at Amon Hen in the last chapter of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. It is a pivotal scene for many reasons. The fellowship has reached a point in their journey where a decision has to be made as to whether

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<sup>384</sup> It is worth noting, perhaps, that the representation of the writing in the Black Speech is rendered in the first edition in a more delicate line than in many later editions. Comparing the HarperCollins Collector’s edition of 2013, based on the reset edition of 2002, the reproduction of the ring verse is decidedly thicker in line, to the point of losing distinction as to whether the signs above the initial letters are comprised of three distinct strokes or not. The verse manifests in distinct forms, affected by its different material circumstances.

to continue west of the river Anduin to Minas Tirith or to cross the river and head east into Mordor. As Ring-bearer, the decision falls upon Frodo, who asks for a brief respite: “Frodo did not answer at once. Then he spoke slowly. ‘I know that haste is needed, yet I cannot choose. The burden is heavy. Give me an hour longer, and I will speak. Let me be alone!’” (412, 396)

With abundant clarity, this episode focuses on the power of agency afforded to Frodo, testing the autonomy and identity of his heroic persona. This would seem to be the point at which Frodo as the morally responsible hero must choose his own destiny, and in extension the destiny of the quest. And a choice is also made. It is, however, not a choice made by Frodo in the guise of an autonomous heroic subject; instead, it comes to pass in the emergent subjectivity of a distributed agency. Frodo’s choice to cross the Anduin testifies to the vibrant materiality of the Ring. It is not without significance, that it is also a geographical decision.

The emergent agency of the Ring at Amon Hen, intervening in plot progression at a point where all hangs in the balance, so to speak, cuts to the core of the ethics of Middle-earth. Tom Shippey argues that Sauron’s Ring epitomizes the ambivalent morality of Middle-earth, vacillating between a Boethian and a Manichean conception of evil.<sup>385</sup> On the one hand, evil in Middle-earth is the absence of good, lacking the virtues of creative power. On the other hand evil is a force in itself, bearing down on the environment, corrupting the good of the world. Early on in the narration Gandalf, and other authority figures such as Elrond and Galadriel have explained that the ring has precisely this ability to influence its surroundings, and that it will, over time, overpower anyone in its proximity. The Ring has the power to betray its bearer, to slip on and off fingers. Then again, it seems to mainly exert its will by influencing the will of others rather than wielding a manifest agency of its own. However, as Shippey points out, there are clearly figures in the narration not susceptible, at least not for a long time, to the corruptive power of the Ring, Frodo for one but evidently also Sam, Aragon and Faramir have the internal resources to resist the Ring. And Tom Bombadil seems completely unaffected by it. Evil is both a force in its own right and merely an amplifier of existent vice.

At Amon Hen, during his deliberations over the future directions of the quest, Boromir confronts and attempts to take the Ring from Frodo. This is an event that seems to imply a moral deficiency in the character of Boromir, his fall from grace not merely a question of succumbing to an external power but also in part due to an internal predilection for evil. Shippey attributes this ambiguous representation of evil to the aesthetic quality of Tolkien’s work, a mark, as it were, of its realism: “All one need say is that this is how things often are. Maybe all sins need some combi-

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<sup>385</sup> Shippey, 2005, p 159

nation of external prompting and inner weakness.”<sup>386</sup> To some degree it is a valid interpretation of the scene. However, its basic presumption, namely the validity of the distinction between internal and external, is erroneous. The moral elasticity of the Ring as it comes to the fore in Boromir’s action indicates how *The Lord of the Rings* – and in extension the media ecology of Middle-earth – questions the very foundation of such a distinction. Rather than representing morality, the Ring stages configurative textuality as an ethical event. The ethics of Middle-earth is ontological, or more precisely, it is ontogenetic. These are the moments when the traces of a non-arbitrary intervention in the narrative become salient. The narrative emerges as a thing within an ecology of things, and cognition becomes ecological, sympoietic. At Amon Hen this outburst of embodied, non-humanist experience is achieved by establishing the narrative event of the *Lord of the Rings* in its direct media-specific environment, in the materiality of the book, and more precisely the materiality of the map. By way of ekphrasis, the material heterogeneity of the environment, both as it is represented in the narrative and as it emerges in the actual reading, is structurally coupled in the operationally ajar closure of sympoiesis, revealing the vibrant materiality of the Ring.

Fleeing from Boromir, Frodo uses the Ring “leaping blindly up the path to the hill-top”, until he comes upon the ruins of an archaic structure, a high seat “reached by a stair of many steps”. It is “the Seat of Seeing, on Amon Hen, the Hill of the Eye of the Men of Númenor.” Atop the crumbled albeit still throne-like seat, Frodo, invisible and in the shadowy realm of the Ring, becomes entrenched in the materiality of what appears to be an ancient and magical medium of farseeing: “At first he could see little. He seemed to be in a world of mist in which there were only shadows: the Ring was upon him. Then here and there the mist gave way and he saw many visions: small and clear as if they were under his eyes upon a table, and yet remote. There was no sound, only bright living images.” (400)

What follows is a succession of panoramic visions, as Frodo’s sight extends to all four quarters, touching upon notable sites and whole geographical areas of Middle-earth, east, west, north and south. At first the visions are general, moving over vast expanses, from a distance. Soon they become more detailed, reaching under the “boughs of Mirkwood”, coming near their objects, while at the same time blurring perspective and proportions, “[t]he Misty Mountains were crawling like anthills: orcs were issuing out of a thousand holes.” (400) The signs of war are everywhere, and closer to the action, the visions speed up, as the extended sight moves more rapidly over the lands:

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<sup>386</sup> Ibid., p 165

Horsemen were galloping on the grass of Rohan; wolves poured from Isengard. From the havens of Harad ships of war put out to sea; and out of the East Men were moving endlessly: swordsmen, spearmen, bowmen upon horses, chariots of chieftains and laden wains. All the power of the Dark Lord was in motion. 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. Hope leaped in his heart. But against Minas Tirith was set another fortress, greater and more strong. Thither, eastward, unwilling his eye was drawn. It passed the ruined bridges of Osgiliath, the grinning gates of Minas Morgul, and the haunted Mountains, and it looked upon Gorgoroth, the valley of terror in the Land of Mordor. Mount Doom was burning, and a great reek rising. Then at last his gaze was held: wall upon wall, battlement upon battlement, black, immeasurably strong, mountain of iron, gate of steel, tower of adamant, he saw it: Barad-dûr, Fortress of Sauron. All hope left him. (401)

The visions unfold, as “if they were under his eyes upon a table, and yet remote”, soundless, like scenes in a silent film. The implicit reference to the cinematographic medium marks Tolkien’s general visual imagination; furthermore, the episode establishes an ekphrastic relation to the map accompanying the book, a map that in the first edition – as opposed to many later editions – was printed on a separate paper, folded and attached at the back of the book. The map offers the reader a site upon which Frodo’s visions may unfold, a function that is further enforced as many of the sites referred to are little known to the reader, most of them – Gorgoroth, Osgiliath, Ethir Anduin – having merely been mentioned once in passing at the council of Elrond. Grounded in the materiality of the map, the foreign-sounding names and strange places of Middle-earth obtain a geographical presence, triangulating reader, book and map in a distributed perception.

Just as the list of foreign places and names situates the reader in the materiality of Middle-earth, the Seat of Seeing, as an ancient material artifact and archeological remnant of the fallen Numenorean civilization, reconfigures Frodo’s sensual apparatus, extending – in a McLuhanesque fashion – the sense of sight well beyond its corporeal bounds. Middle-earth emerges as an embodied perception, an ontogenetic perception-event, where the arcane technology of the site conflates with Frodo’s sense of sight. It soon becomes clear, however, if it was not before, that the new sensual apparatus into which Frodo – and very likely the reader, following Frodo’s visions across the expanses of the map (Figure 35) – is being enfolded, sidesteps any notions of autonomous subjectivity. Here individuation is clearly a matter of sympoiesis and not strict autopoiesis. This entails understanding influence as on a corporeal level. What might initially appear to be an expression of disinterested

contemplation of an aesthetic object, claiming attention and provoking an emotional reaction, but nothing more than that – “at last his gaze was held” – is turned on its head in the following paragraph: “And suddenly he felt the Eye. There was an eye in the Dark Tower that did not sleep. He knew that it had become aware of his gaze.” (401) The object of attention – drawing the gaze of aesthetic contemplation – is no mere passive object; instead it gazes back. As the medium of enhanced telescopic vision has generated a new sensual apparatus, rather than merely functioning as an extension of the senses, it also becomes clear that it is an apparatus that invalidates the integrity of Frodo’s sensorium. Rather than responding to Frodo’s gaze, the Eye is already present in the distributed perception of the medium, already gazing back, as the operationally ajar feedback of an observing system.

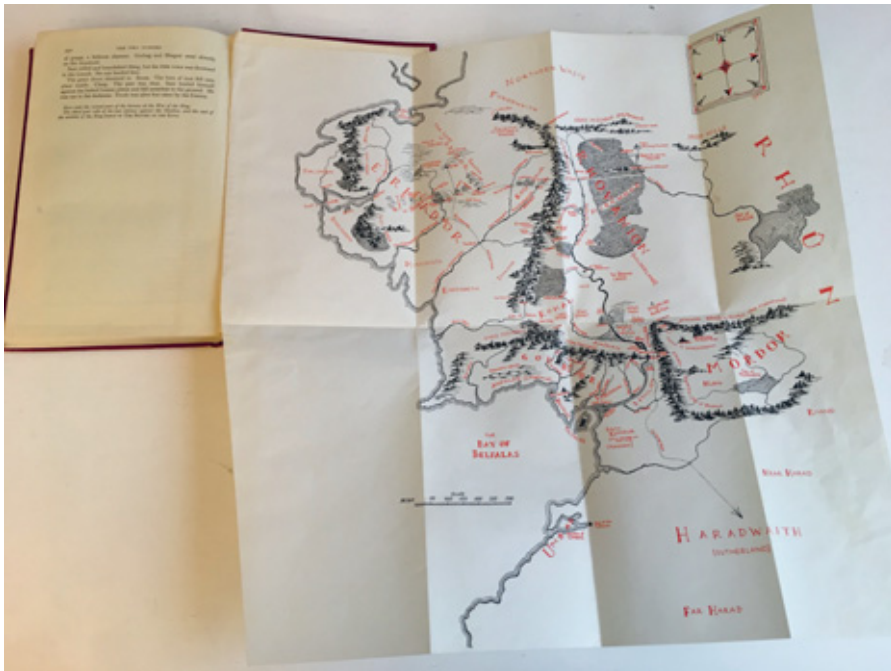


Figure 35: Map of Middle-earth, folded in J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (1954), first edition, second imprinting

It is not surprising that the narration here veers into synesthesia. The mingling and eventual transgression of the traditional sensorial division has already been alerted by the initial emphasis, at the point of first accessing the medium of the Seat of Seeing, on the quietude of the visions – “[t]here was no sound, only bright living images” (400). The verbal medium of writing insists on being perceived as purely visual. Contesting a clear division of the senses, however, the paragraph stages a sen-

orium where the senses mingle. The increasing vitality and heightened intensity of the visions indicate an auidial dimension: the rustle and noise of armies mustering, while the burning and fiery fields of Gorgoroth threaten an olfactory breakthrough as “Mount Doom was burning, and a great reek rising.” And as the paratactic progression of the paragraph culminates, it bursts out in the onomatopoeic “Barad-dûr” whose ominous sounding name – a name that is a sound, and being a name from an unknown language it can be no more than a sound – is immediately translated into “Fortress of Sauron”.

Amidst this complex sensorium, the eye – the Eye – becomes tactile: “suddenly he *felt* the Eye” (emphasis added). The presence of the eye in the Dark Tower is suddenly physical, its gaze weighing down on the surroundings, embodied: “It leaped towards him; almost like a finger he felt it, searching for him. Very soon it would nail him down, know exactly where he was.” (401) Immersed and entangled in a medium of mingled senses, Frodo plunges into inarticulate noise. It is a lacuna in the text, a sudden intrusion of dark matter perceivable only as its gravitational pull bends the fabric of reality, the thingness of the ring emerging and receding into the real:

He heard himself crying out: *Never, never!* Or was it: *Verily I come, I come to you?* He could not tell. Then a flash from some other point of power there came to his mind another thought *Take it off! Take it off! Fool, take it off! Take off the Ring!*

The two powers strove in him. For a moment, perfectly balanced between their piercing points, he writhed, tormented. Suddenly he was aware of himself again, Frodo, neither the Voice nor the Eye: free to choose, and with one remaining instant in which to do so. He took the Ring off his finger. He was kneeling in clear sunlight before the high seat. A black shadow seemed to pass like an arm above him; it missed Amon Hen and groped out west, and faded. Then all the sky was clean and blue and birds sang in every tree. (401)

From the distribution of intersecting agencies – bodies and senses, media technologies, maps, towers and a ring – a specific cognition emerges. It is a moment of ontogenesis, a medium with the power to build a world. Which world it generates is undecided, perhaps indefinitely; there is simply no way to tell who Frodo becomes, only that he is entangled in a process of becoming. The episode puts him – and the reader – in connection with the secret of the media ecology of Middle-earth, with that moment of heterogeneity beyond the power of the archon, beyond the Eye in the tower, beyond even the Eye in the Ring. It is a moment of sympoiesis, marking the intersection of different represented agencies – and certainly one of the clearest examples of how the media ecology of Middle-earth challenges the internal-external division of autonomous subjectivity. For good and for bad.



## 6. Ecology and ethics: the exteriority of Tom Bombadil

A media-ecological understanding of the ethics of Middle-earth is aligned to the notion of ethics presented by Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas prefigures ethics as the unquestionable and asymmetrical responsibility to and for the other, as adhering to the non-reducible strangeness of the other. This responsibility and respect predates subjectivity: it is actually what calls subjectivity into being. Levinas describes this moment as an emergent materiality: as an event of pure noise, an act of speech without meaning, as a saying without a said. The saying interrupts being; grounding and predating being, it is located in an absolute exteriority; nevertheless, it is an exteriority bearing down on subjectivity, constituting subjectivity as an undeniable respect for the alterity of the other. As such, the ethical event is frightening, overwhelming, demanding a radical passivity, an absolute openness to the other. In his early writings, Levinas describes the exposure to the exteriority of the other as sleeplessness, a temporality without time, an existence without a world, without existents: it is the *there is* (the *il-y-a* in the French original): “This impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable ‘consummation’ of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself we shall designate by the term *there is*. The *there is*, inasmuch as it resists a personal form, is ‘being in general.’”<sup>387</sup> The relation to the *there is* is one of participation, predating the identity of consciousness, says Levinas.<sup>388</sup> It is a strangeness that intrudes, that grounds a relation-of-nonrelation in a radical passivity; beyond the subject-object distinction it is where participation presumes subjectivity as an emergent distribution of agencies. Levinas writes:

*There is* is an impersonal form, like in it rains, or it is warm. Its anonymity is essential. The mind does not find itself faced with an apprehended exterior. The exterior – if one insists on this term – remains uncorrelated with an interior. It is no longer given. It is no longer a world. What we call the I is itself submerged by the night, invaded, depersonalized, stifled by it. The disappearance of all things and of the I leaves what cannot disappear, the sheer fact of being in which one participates, whether one wants to or not, without having taken the initiative, anonymously. Being remains, like a field of forces, like a heavy atmosphere belonging to no one, universal, returning in the midst of the negation which put it aside, and in all the powers to which that negation may be multiplied.<sup>389</sup>

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<sup>387</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishing, 1988 (1978)), p 57

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, p 60

<sup>389</sup> Levinas, 1988 (1978), p 58

Tom Sparrow argues that Levinas' ethical theory of a subjectivity brought into being by the other produces the subject as a "plastic substance", event-like in its structure: "The substance of the self is then little more than the viscosity or consistency of its sensuous life, or a finite expression of the sensible."<sup>390</sup> Sensation ties the individual body to the material environment, while at the same time affecting individuation. This "ambivalence of sensation" is the key to understanding "identity as an aesthetic object"<sup>391</sup>, says Sparrow, and continues: "Sensibility is neither activity nor the mere receptivity of preformed representations. Sensibility, the site of sensation, is the place where the identity of the world and the identity of my body come to pass simultaneously, yet diachronically."<sup>392</sup>

The event-like character of subjectivity that is elaborated by Levinas would here seem to correspond to the manner in which ecosystems enable structural coupling by sympoietic closure. To this extent, the aesthetics of media ecologies implies an ethical and political dimension. By way of Timothy Morton's notion of "the ecological thought", Sparrow delineates the form of that dimension:

To think the ecological thought is not enough to encounter the strange stranger face-to-face and be struck with the weirdness of its intimacy. And it is not enough to imagine the immense network of things that make up ecological life. The ecological thought requires us to recognize that there is no adequate perspective on the environment that would enable us to look it in the face. The environment faces us from every angle; it is everywhere we look and everywhere we don't. It both surrounds us and inhabits us and in the final analysis this means that we have no inside or outside, and thus we ourselves are nothing other than one of the strange strangers that haunt us.<sup>393</sup>

As has already been noted, the episode at Amon Hen isolates Frodo's powers of volition. And as such it bears heavily on the ethics of *The Lord of the Rings*. Evidently – and clearly stated in the text – Frodo comes to a decision, and it is a decision that has distinct consequences for the continuation as well as the character of the narrative. Christine Brooke-Rose, in her critical assessment of *The Lord of the Rings*, takes the correlation of Frodo's choice and the progression of the narrative as proof of the arbitrariness of the secondary-world of Middle-earth. Rather than reflecting a true morally contingent choice, the events at Amon Hen show how the psychological motivation of characters "functions as an a posteriori justification of the narrative

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<sup>390</sup> Tom Sparrow, *Levinas Unhinged* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2013), p 53

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*, p 46

<sup>392</sup> *ibid.*, p 51

<sup>393</sup> *ibid.*, p 81

sequence.”<sup>394</sup> This reading, representative of a modernist critical approach, does not attest to an ecological understanding of ethical participation. Frodo’s suppressed scream at Amon Hen is simply insoluble, pure noise, and as such, following Todorov’s analysis, an emergence and an intrusion of the pure fantastic. There is no telling from the material at hand – not even extending the investigation to include the complete legendarium in all its versions – whether Frodo, when removing the Ring from his finger at Amon Hen, and in consequence putting it on at Mount Doom – is acting in accordance with his own free will or not. All that can be concluded is that the action is his choice and as such, corresponds to his volition, as it emerges in that specific situation, at that specific time in the narrative. At Mount Doom, Frodo clearly has become evil, if evil implies that he is acting in accordance with Sauron’s will. On the other hand, it is that very same choice – putting the Ring on his finger at Mount Doom – that leads to the destruction of the Ring, through Gollum’s interference, which too is brought about under the influence of the Ring. Clearly Frodo is not represented as an autonomous individual, rationally and disinterestedly coming to a decision. Instead, the moment of volition, the distributed agency at Amon Hen, already involves the mute materiality of the environment, the murmur of the other, always already coupled to the self. As such, the ethical event is frightening, overwhelming, and demanding a radical passivity, an absolute openness to the other. The relation to the *there is* of this exteriority is, as was pointed out above, one of participation, predating the identity of consciousness. It is participation as an ecological collectivity. Timothy Morton notes: “If this collectivity means not being part of something bigger, it must be a collectivity of weakness, vulnerability, and incompleteness. Ecology without Nature is ecology without holism.”<sup>395</sup>

The traces of sympoiesis at Amon Hen mark the openness of the media ecology of Middle-earth. This openness refuses totalization, allowing for the assembled state of its parts. As Frodo succumbs to the inarticulate cry of radical exteriority – a cry never represented as such within the narrative – the media ecology of Middle-earth asserts an ethical responsibility for the exteriority of the other. This does not,

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<sup>394</sup> Brooke-Rose sees this as another facet of the unsuccessful attempt made by Tolkien to steep his fantasy in the form of realist fiction. *The Lord of the Rings* accordingly offers more psychological motivation than most marvelous fiction does, and clearly, in Brooke-Rose’s evaluation, than most good marvelous fiction does, merely, it would seem because such motivations do not belong within the marvelous. “In LR it is more developed, not in the sense of profundity or subtlety (as in realistic narrative), but in the sense that it is more dwelt upon than is usual in the marvelous. But its role is more transparent than in realistic narrative, which goes to considerable lengths to mask the *a posteriori* aspect. Thus the pride and envy of Boromir are necessary to his attempt to get the ring from Frodo and to Frodo’s consequent decision to go it alone (and hence to the split of the Grey Company[sic.]), but is so emphasized as to make the attempt foreseeable.” Brooke-Rose, 2010, p 248. It could perhaps be added to Brooke-Rose’s defense that she bases her notion of marvelous fiction more on the genre of fairy-tales than on the emerging genre of fantasy.

<sup>395</sup> Morton, 2010, p 127

however, entail a moral judgment on the actions of Frodo, nor on those of Boromir, or even Sauron. It merely evinces how participation and sympoietic configuration always already involve a distribution of power.

### **Things merely are: the horror of environmentalism**

In the present discussion of the media ecology of Middle-earth, one aspect generally associated with ecological thinking has been absent: not without reason, as will be clarified, nature's role in the ecology of Middle-earth has hitherto been overlooked. It is well documented – in letters, critical works and biographies – that nature and the environment were matters of great personal interest to Tolkien, and not merely from an aesthetic point of view.<sup>396</sup> Patrick Curry argues that one of the reasons why Tolkien's work resonated so well with the increasing ecological awareness of the counter-culture movements of the late 1960s, and the emerging ecopolitical movements of the early 1970s, was its affinities with a neo-pagan reverence for nature.<sup>397</sup> Tolkien's explicitly expressed respect for nature and his clear stand against what he perceived as the destructive side of industrialism are often seen as expressions of “a visionary, ecocentric worldview” from a “visionary environmentalist”<sup>398</sup> Whether the defense of nature comes from a neo-pagan sensibility of animism, as Curry argues, or if it should be perceived as a representation of the notion of Christian stewardship, as Mathew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans argue, seems to have little effect on the question of the nature of Nature.<sup>399</sup> Nature in Middle-earth seems to be considered a transcendental given, generally representing positive values, either as an expression of “the goodness of the earth as the handiwork of its creator”<sup>400</sup> or as the local distinction “important for resisting the homogenization of modernity”.<sup>401</sup>

Recent attempts to problematize the idealization of nature in Tolkien have been made from the perspective of new materialist and ecocritical theory. Although not explicitly from an ecocritical perspective, albeit implementing Jane Bennett's notion of vital materiality and distributed agency, Chris Brawley argues that the re-enchantment of the world – including nature – that is the recovery-effect of the secondary

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<sup>396</sup> “In all my works I take the part of trees as against all their enemies.”, Carpenter, 2010, p 419

<sup>397</sup> Patrick Curry, *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1997) 29; Patrick Curry, *Deep Roots in a Time of Frost* (Zürich: Walking Tree, 2014), p 52

<sup>398</sup> Stuart D. Lee, *A Companion to J. R. R. Tolkien* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), p 432-433

<sup>399</sup> Mathew Dickerson, Jonathan Evans, *Ents, Elves and Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Lexington, Ky: Kentucky University Press, 2006). One of the guiding assumptions in the argument of the book is that “Tolkien's environmental ethic was firmly rooted in a deeply Christian, Catholic understanding of the world and its creator.” (p xxi)

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.*, p xx

<sup>401</sup> Curry, 1997, p 69

belief of Tolkien's fantasy, could be tied to perceiving nature as wholly other and un-appropriable, in essence, as part of an ecology. Nature in Middle-earth retains a sense of the numinous, argues Brawley, which is one of the reasons the *Lord of the Rings* is often perceived as a religious book, while containing no overt reference to religious practice, and more precisely it is this sense of the numinous that is at the core of the emotional appeal of fantasy, this is how it functions as a sublime and in continuation subversive mode: by generating an un-appropriable sense of wonder and awe. Nature cannot be explained; neither does Tolkien – or mythopoeic fantasy – attempt to explain it. It is simply there. Brawley borrows his concept of the numinous from German theologian Rudolf Otto, thus drawing an implicit connection between nature, fantasy and a transcendent plane.<sup>402</sup> Likewise, in Susan Jeffers' study *Arda Inhabited: Environmental Relationships in The Lord of The Rings* – perhaps the most comprehensive ecocritical study of Tolkien to date – Tolkien's work is seen as a viable opportunity to extend the focus on the physical interconnectedness of materialities to include connections between “the material and the transcendental.”<sup>403</sup>

Thus nature in Tolkien seems to be habitually connected to a distinct version of morality and spirituality, one stressing the sacred and blessed character of nature and existence. However, rather than seeing this notion of nature as an invitation to view Tolkien's work as a “corrective to some of the faults of ecocriticism, and how ecocriticism in turn allows Tolkien scholars to see elements they might otherwise overlook”<sup>404</sup>, as Jeffers claims, it could instead be taken as an indication, pace Timothy Morton, to treat the media ecology of Middle-earth as an ecology without nature. In fact, by doing so, one of the more problematic aspects of Tolkien's idea of secondary belief could be cleared out, namely the distinction, discussed earlier, made in “On Fairy-Stories” between enchantment and magic on the one hand and art and technique on the other. This is, as noted, partly a moral distinction. The art and enchantment of Secondary Belief, Tolkien argues, communicates the otherness of a

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<sup>402</sup> “Otto points to the feelings of the ‘eerie’ and ‘weird’ which one feels in the face of the ‘wholly other’. This concept of the wholly other is what interests us in our discussion of fantasy as it aids us in the understanding of ‘wonder’ within fantasy literature.” Chris Brawley, *Nature and the Numinous in Mythopoeic Fantasy* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), p 16

<sup>403</sup> Jeffers writes: “Ecocriticism's focus on interconnectedness is a helpful addition to critical theory. However, ecocriticism itself would be improved by an expansion of what connections it looks at. Just as race, class, and gender can be discussed as environments, so too can a particular approach to spirituality. If ecocriticism is already observing points of connection between elements of the material world, it is not an incredible leap to include points of connection between the material and the transcendental. This connection is certainly applicable to an understanding of environment in Tolkien's work. For Tolkien, connection with the material world reflects a connection with the transcendental. The two are intertwined.” Susan Jeffers, *Arda Inhabited: Environmental Relationships in The Lord of The Rings* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University, 2014), p 16

<sup>404</sup> *Ibid.*, p 119

secondary world as other – as an un-appropriable other – but it does not affect the primary world. Thus while Tolkien stresses participation as one of the basic tenets of secondary belief – becoming part of the game, as opposed to merely playing by the rules of the game, is in fact what separates secondary belief from the willing suspension of disbelief – it is never a question of thinking of subjectivity as an ecological event. Instead, it is clear that the intrusion upon the primary world of the (reading) subject is what characterizes the techniques of magic, which is an evil art, corrupting and falsifying reality. If Tolkien’s moral distinction between art and technique has merit, it would indicate that both subjectivity and nature are ultimately self-contained and autonomous systems. This is also how the transcendental model of ecocriticism – and environmentalism – seems to treat nature, as a benevolent force whose influence on the environment respects its integrity, whereas the techniques of magic wield a thoroughly invasive influence upon the environment. However, as has been the argument throughout this chapter, it is precisely this self-contained notion of subjectivity that is put in question by the configurative textuality of the media ecology of Middle-earth. Thus Timothy Morton is correct when noting that the “holistic world” of Middle-earth “is exciting and involved, but in the end, it is just a gigantic version of the ready-made commodity.”<sup>405</sup> There are, however, (virtually innumerable) versions of Middle-earth where the world is not holistic, and where nature, as opposed to technology, is not innately good, but rather where both are characterized by the horror of the *there is*, by “the impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable ‘consummation’ of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself.”<sup>406</sup> It is a strangeness that intrudes, that grounds environmental connectedness in a radical passivity; beyond the subject-object distinction, it is where participation presumes subjectivity as an emergent distribution of agencies.

If configurative textuality is sympoietic – that is, if it entails cognition as an event of distributed agency in the form of an operationally ajar closure, as is argued throughout this thesis – then neither nature nor art or subjectivity can be self-contained. In the media ecology of Middle-earth magic and enchantment, art and technique alike affect the world. Tolkien’s depreciative description of magic applies to both; they both desire “*power* in this world, domination of things and wills.”<sup>407</sup> Participation does not entail belonging to a whole. Rather, we are dealing here, as Timothy Morton points out, with participation in the form of an ecological collective. Furthermore, the moral status of nature as a non-invasive and respectful otherness is not as clear-cut as the environmentalist interpretation of Tolkien’s work would indicate.

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<sup>405</sup> Morton, 2007, p 98

<sup>406</sup> Levinas, 1988, p 57

<sup>407</sup> Tolkien, 2006, p 143

The episode in Book One when the four hobbits, Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin, leaving the Shire, take a shortcut through the Old Forests and meet Tom Bombadil will here serve to elucidate the point. Stylistically and thematically, this is somewhat of an anomalous passage; taking up three chapters, it does not seem to expedite the narrative in any significant way, nor does it seem to impact on or pertain to the story at large. It is quite significant that the episode is absent from both Peter Jackson's and Ralph Bakshi's cinematic adaptations.<sup>408</sup> It does not, in any clear and perceivable manner, serve the plot and is often cited as an example of Tolkien's overly detailed, weighted and pedantic narrative style.<sup>409</sup> Tolkien himself, however, considered it an indispensable episode in the larger narrative, although in his answers to the many letters he received – from proof readers, editors and fans – he never goes into the precise details as to why Tom Bombadil is important: “he represents something that I feel important, though I would not be prepared to analyze the feeling precisely”<sup>410</sup>, Tolkien writes on 25 April 1954 in a lengthy reply to Naomi Mitchison, who had been reading page proofs of the first two books. Tolkien continues in the same letter:

I would not, however, have left in him in, if he did not have some kind of function. The story is cast in terms of a good side, and a bad side, beauty against ruthless ugliness, tyranny against kingship, moderated freedom with consent against compulsion that has long lost any object save mere power, and so on; but both sides in some degree, conservative or destructive, want a measure of control. but [sic] if you have, as it were taken a ‘vow of poverty’, renounced control, and take your delight in things for themselves without reference to yourself, watching, observing, and to some extent knowing, then the question of the rights and wrongs of power and control might become utterly meaningless to you, and the means of power quite valueless. It is a natural pacifist view, which always arises in the mind when there is a war.<sup>411</sup>

From a political and ethical perspective, as well as thematic and narratological, Tom Bombadil is situated outside – or beyond – the traditional tensions of dichotomous structures. It is no coincidence then that this character, in the Harvard Lampoon parody of 1969, is portrayed in the guise of a beatnik/hippie.<sup>412</sup> Tom Bombadil of-

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<sup>408</sup> See Janet Brennan Croft, “Three Rings for Hollywood: Scripts for The Lord of the Rings by Zimmerman, Boorman, and Beagle”, and Gwendolyn A. Morgan, “I Don't Think We're in Kansas Anymore: Peter Jackson's Film Interpretations of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings”, in Leslie Stratyner and James R. Keller (eds.), *Fantasy Fiction into Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007)

<sup>409</sup> Brooke-Rose, 2010 (1981), p 236

<sup>410</sup> Carpenter, 2000, p 178

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*, p 178f

<sup>412</sup> Saving Spam from being sexually abused by “a bloated blossom”, the parody version of Tom Bombadil – Tim Benzadrino – emerges in Chapter 2 of *Bored of the Rings*, singing the verse: “Take-a-lid! Smoke-a-lid! Pop the mescalino!/Stash the hash! Gonna crash! Make me methedrino!/Hop a hill! Pop a pill! For Old Tim Benzadrino!”, Beard and Kenney, 2012, p 23



fers a resistance to the organizing structures any measure of control puts into place, although Tolkien implies that the difference between good and evil control is that in the latter, “nothing would be left for him.”<sup>413</sup>

But also from a media-ecological perspective, Tom Bombadil occupies a privileged position. When composing *The Lord of the Rings*, the character had been figuring in Tolkien’s writings for some time; a prose fragment, probably from the early 1920s, contains a brief sketch of a pre-Arthurian, mythic England containing the figure Tombombadil<sup>414</sup>, and on 15 February 1934 Tolkien had published a poem in the *Oxford Magazine* entitled “The Adventures of Tom Bombadil”. The publication in 1962 of the illustrated book *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* (Figure 36) contained this poem, as well as a number of verses Tolkien had written for other occasions and adapted for the publication, whereof three taken from *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>415</sup> A new verse was also written exclusively for the collection, “Bombadil Goes Boating”, explicitly inserted within the time frame of *The Lord of the Rings*, elaborating Tom’s relation to farmer Maggot and explaining the circumstances around his fortuitous appearance in the Old Forest. Tolkien also provided a preface to the book of verses, playfully and with a distinct sense of humor placing the verses within the textual history of the Red Book of Westmarch and sketching typologies and brief generic histories. In a sense then, Tom Bombadil is involved in one of the last reconfigurations in which Tolkien himself took part, as well as having an impact on the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*.

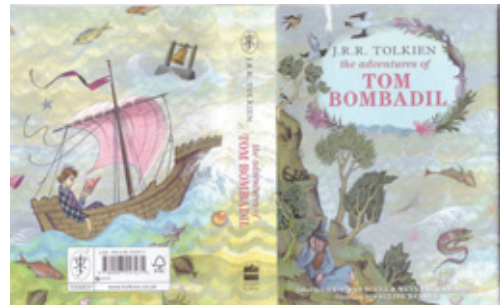


Figure 36: Cover of the 2014 reissue of J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* (London: HarperCollins, 2014)

In *The Lord of the Rings* Tom Bombadil is represented as a figure imbued with mystical powers, sidestepping the laws – natural and magic alike – otherwise governing Middle-earth. He is not affected by the Ring and seems to be able to traverse great distances momentarily, as long as they are confined within a space coinciding more

<sup>413</sup> Carpenter, 2000, p 179

<sup>414</sup> “Tombombadil [sic] was the name of one [of] the oldest inhabitants of the kingdom; but he was a hale and hearty fellow. Four foot high in his boots he was, and three foot broad; his beard went to his knees; his eyes were keen and bright, and his voice deep and melodious. He wore a tall hat with a blue feather [;] his jacket was blue and his boots were yellow.” J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*, Christina Scull & Wayne G Hammond, (London: HarperCollins, 2014), p 278

<sup>415</sup> Ibid., p 17f

or less with the Old Forest; and his sensual apparatus is (at times at least) distributed throughout the environment. When questioning Goldberry – Tom’s elf-queen, daughter-of-the-River life partner – as to the nature of Tom’s identity, Frodo famously gets the reply that he merely is.

‘He is,’ said Goldberry, staying her swift movements and smiling.

Frodo looked at her questioningly. ‘He is, as you have seen him,’ she said in answer to his look. ‘He is the Master of wood, water and hill.’

‘Then all this strange land belongs to him?’

‘No indeed!’ she answered, and her smile faded. ‘That would indeed be a burden.’ She added in a low voice, as if to herself. ‘The trees and the grasses and all things growing or living in the land belong each to themselves. Tom Bombadil is the Master. No one has ever caught old Tom walking in the forest, wading in the water, leaping on the hill-tops under light and shadow. He has no fear. Tom Bombadil is master.’ (124)

In Susan Jeffers ecocritical interpretation, Tom Bombadil represents an interconnectedness that questions the nature-culture division and focuses on nonhierarchical, rhizomatic relations. However, morality in Middle-earth also hinges on the environment, Jeffers claims, and more precisely on the manner in which people are connected to the environment, where true goodness (spiritual and transcendental) is grounded in acknowledging and respecting the innate moral good of the environment. Ecology is nature. Jeffers argues that Tom is “perhaps the ultimate example of this kind of connectivity that validates others without undermining one’s sense of self.”<sup>416</sup> This connectedness to the place of his home, to the environment is also, says Jeffers, what makes him “immune to the effects of the Ring.” Moral virtue and benevolent agency in Middle-earth are thus closely tied to the environment, acting in accordance with nature, and Tom Bombadil represents here the highest, most spiritual form of moral agency, a power that comes from and is in harmony with the land. Jeffers’ transcendental and spiritual version of ecocriticism posits a morality to nature that seems to contradict one of the central tenets of Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the rhizome, namely its insistence on immanent and nonhierarchical relations. While Jeffers has a point that a radical interconnectedness – rhizomatic and nonhierarchical – does seem to be implied in certain passages of *The Lord of the Rings* – and Tom Bombadil is certainly one of those – her analysis nevertheless implies that nature has a benevolent influence, whereas technology is innately malevolent. This division complies with the division between technique and art discussed earlier, and Jeffers argument is corroborated by the explicit connection made

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<sup>416</sup> Jeffers, 2014, chapter 1, p 25

in *The Lord of Rings* between moral values and the treatment of nature. The ravaging industrialism of Sauron and Saruman is clearly represented as evil, while it is equally apparent that the benevolent power of the Elves stems from a sense of environmental harmony. But, as pointed out earlier, these differences – corresponding to that between art and technique, magic and enchantment – are ultimately differences in degree, not in kind. Ecocriticism in the hands of Jeffers functions as a tool for interpretation – and an ecocritical interpretation of the meaning produced by a given textual configuration *The Lord of the Rings* has obvious merits – but it does not take into consideration how this textual configuration itself emerges within the environment of a media ecology.

Andrew Light argues that Tom represents “green time”, an embodiment of a natural time scale, made present – perhaps ever more clearly so – against the very limited time scale of plot progression.<sup>417</sup> And most certainly, time behaves oddly in the forests represented in *The Lord of the Rings*. On the one hand, this seems to be tied to a certain fairyland quality in these areas – most prominently in the depiction of Lórien, which in this sense functions as a realm outside the natural world<sup>418</sup> – while on the other hand, it is connected to a distinct narrative perspective, following, by focalization, the time of trees and stones.

### **The Old Forest: environmental ontogenesis**

The episode in the Old Forest, Chapters 6-8 in Book One, functions both as a portal fantasy, where the protagonists by way of a series of thresholds enter into another realm of existence, while at the same time establishing the narrative as an immersive fantasy, from the point of view of the forest. On the one hand, it narrates a passage to a different realm, to yet another world within the secondary world, a kind of magical fairyland; on the other hand, this passage is achieved by letting the secondary world steer the narration, letting, as it were, the secondary world speak. The strangeness of the Old Forest is thus in part a question of travelling to another realm by submitting to the agency of the present one. The environment becomes an ontogenetic medium.

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<sup>417</sup> Andrew Light, “Tolkien’s Green Time: Environmental Themes in *The Lord of the Rings*”, in Gregory Bassham and Eric Bronson (eds.), *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy: one book to rule them all* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003)

<sup>418</sup> Sam notes, after the fellowship has left Lórien, that the phases of the moon seem out of sync: “You’ll remember, Mr. Frodo, the Moon was waning as we lay on the flet up on that tree: a week from the full, I reckon. And we’d been a week on the way last night, when up pops a New Moon as thin as a nail-paring, as if we had never stayed no time in the Elvish country.

‘Well, I can remember three nights there for certain, and I seem to remember several more, but I would take my oath it was never a whole month. Anyone would think that time did not count in there!’

‘And perhaps that was the way of it,’ said Frodo. ‘In that land, maybe, we were in a time that has elsewhere long gone by.’ (388)

Through a series of anthropomorphisms the narrative is focalized in the environment. This is, however, a highly unstable focalization, implying an uncanny animism rather than establishing nature as a divine and benevolent agent.

Entering the Old Forest, the narrative is characterized in great parts by the epistemological uncertainty associated with Todorov's definition of the fantastic. Perceptions are constantly muddled, and the narration vacillates between the figurative and the non-figurative. Dead metaphors as well as nature are animated in the Old Forest. At the very outset, setting out in the morning, the hobbits are inserted into an environment emphasizing ecological feedback: "They mounted, and soon they were riding off into the mist, which seemed to open reluctantly before them and close forbiddingly behind them." (109) It soon becomes clear that the anthropomorphisms with which objects are habitually ascribed agency, do not operate only on a figurative level. The hedge separating the Old Forest from the Shire is "looming" and the passage through the hedge "formed a tunnel that dived deep under the Hedge". These innocuous anthropomorphisms will gradually be defamiliarized as the narrative progresses. The transition is explicitly thematized, as Merry, closing the gate at the far end of the tunnel – "[t]he sound was ominous" (110) – commenting the "bogey-stories" and nursery tales about the forest, notes: "At any rate I don't believe them. But the Forest *is* queer. Everything in it is very much alive, more aware than things are in the Shire. And the trees do not like strangers. They watch you." Merry intersperses his exposition of local superstition with a series of verbal caveats, undermining its truth value ("so I am told", "they do say", "at least I have heard so"), and while not particularly convincing to the reader, it focuses on the instability of the verbal description, vacillating between figurative and non-figurative language.

It is not long before the landscape of the Old Forest is truly shifting: "These trees *do* shift" (111), Merry exclaims, only a page later. The landscape becomes – as is often noted – a character in itself.<sup>419</sup> While the Forest – and particularly the tree Old Man Willow, whose malevolence stands at the center of its gravitational pull – exerts and acts with what seems a deliberate intention; its actions are also at the same time clearly formed by the presence of the hobbits and their behavior. The intrusion of the hobbits is stressed, but so is the viscosity of the environment into which they intrude: the mist, the hedge and the tunnel as well as the paths in the woods closing in upon them, conforming to their bodily movements. So too are their attempts at communication absorbed by the environment. Halfway to the center of the forest, Pippin gives a sudden cry, declaring their good intentions, "but the cry fell as if muffled by a heavy curtain. There was no echo or answer though

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<sup>419</sup> Mendlesohn, 2008, p 36

the wood seemed to become more crowded and more watchful than before.” (111) And as Frodo – a documented glad singer – tries to sing a song about the necessary finitude of forests, he merely produces a low murmur: “*For east or west all woods must fail... Fail* – even as he said the word his voice faded into silence. The air seemed heavy and the making of words wearisome.” (112) While the environment is bearing down on the Hobbits, dulling their senses up to the point when they literally pass out – “Sleepiness seemed to be creeping out of the ground and up their legs, and falling softly out of the air upon their heads and legs.” (116) – it is at the same time an influence partly grounded in the actions of the hobbits, emerging as an ecological feedback. This feedback is further stressed by the sustained refusal to deliver a stable interpretation of the events. Until Merry and Pippin are swallowed by Old Man Willow, the hobbits insist on the possibility of a simultaneous natural and supernatural explanation (117).

When the forest is finally revealed as an uncanny site, governed by strange laws, by an agency somehow centered on the old tree, while still dispersed in the anonymous rustle of the environment, Frodo loses it.

Frodo, without any clear idea of why he did so or what he hoped for, ran along the path crying *help! help! help!* It seemed to him that he could hardly hear the sound of his own shrill voice: it was blown away from him by the willow-wind and drowned in a clamour of leaves, as soon as the worlds left his mouth. He felt desperate: lost and witless.

Suddenly he stopped. There was an answer, or so he thought; but it seemed to come from behind him, away down the path further back in the Forest. He turned round and listened, and soon there could be no doubt: someone was singing a song; a deep and glad voice was singing carelessly and happily, but it was singing nonsense:

*Hey dol! merry dol! ring a dong dillo!*

*Ring a dong! hop along! fal lal the willow!*

*Tom Bom, jolly Tom, Tom Bombadillo!* (118-119)

Tom Bombadil’s nonsensical song, matching the breakdown of logocentric discourse suffered by Frodo, emerges from an indistinct site, disembodied, or rather embodying the environment, an enveloping exteriority without apparent meaning.<sup>420</sup> And of course, Tom enters the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* from a time and a place exterior to the narrative. He is not only older than any other inhabitant of Middle-earth, as is revealed at the Council of Elrond (265), but he is also – as are Old Man

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<sup>420</sup> Two pages on, after Merry and Pippin are rescued from Old Man Willow, the voice of Tom Bombadil seems completely detached from his body: “Too surprised and too relieved to talk, the hobbits followed after him as fast as they could. But that was not fast enough. Tom soon disappeared in front of them, and the noise of his singing got fainter and further away. Suddenly his voice came floating back to them in a loud halloo!” (120)

Willow, Goldberry and the Barrow-wight the hobbits encounter after leaving Tom's house – older than the narrative itself, having seen the light almost twenty years earlier in the poem published in 1934 in the *Oxford Magazine*.<sup>421</sup> And while Tolkien, on learning that the manuscript of “The Silmarillion” had been turned down as a sequel to *The Hobbit*, was quite convinced that Tom did not suit as a “hero of a story”, he was nevertheless clearly reluctant to drop him completely.<sup>422</sup>

Thus Tom Bombadil is unaffected by the Ring, not so much because he derives his power from a holistic connectedness with the environment, as an environmentalist interpretation would have it. Instead, the Ring has no power over him, simply because, with him in the picture, Middle-earth is not a holistic world. With Tom Bombadil in the mesh, Middle-earth insists on being approached as an ecology – and more exactly as a media ecology where a number of intersecting environmental systems participate – and not as a whole. This implies, as Tolkien notes in a letter to Peter Hastings, that new configurations are always being assembled:

“T.B. exhibits another point in his attitude to the Ring, and its failure to affect him. You must concentrate on some part, probably relatively small, of the World (Universe), whether to tell a tale, however long, or to learn anything however fundamental – and therefore much will from that ‘point of view’ be left out, distorted on the circumference, or seem a discordant oddity. The power of the Ring over all concerned, even the Wizards or Emissaries, is not a delusion – but it is not the whole picture, even of the then state and content of that part of the Universe.”<sup>423</sup>

### **Lintips: radical exteriority**

In addition to “The Adventures of Tom Bombadil”, originally published in 1934, and the 1962 poem “Bombadil goes Boating”, where the figure of Tom Bombadil is more closely tied to the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*, supplying some of the circumstances surrounding his unexpected and fortunate appearance in the chapter “The Old Forest”, Tolkien published a third poem featuring Goldberry and Tom Bombadil, “Once upon a Time”, in 1965.<sup>424</sup> This third poem sees a slightly more discordant version of Tom Bombadil, suddenly suffering a moment of environmental

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<sup>421</sup> Scull and Hammond date the poem to “around 1931”. Tolkien, 2014, p 10

<sup>422</sup> In a letter to his publisher, dated 16 December 1937, Tolkien wrote: “Do you think Tom Bombadil, the spirit of the (vanishing) Oxford and Berkshire countryside, could be made into the hero of a story? Or is he, as I suspect, fully enshrined in the enclosed verse? Still I could enlarge the portrait.”, Carpenter, 2000, p 26

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*, p 192

<sup>424</sup> “Once upon a Time” was published, on request, in the collection *Winter's Tales for Children* in 1965, edited by Caroline Hillier. The poem was reprinted in 2014 in *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*.

excommunication. As opposed to the versions figured in the earlier publications, where Tom is connected with and perfectly attuned to the natural world, he is confronted here with a part of creation that refuses to communicate:

Once upon a moon on the brink of June  
a-dewing the lintips went too soon.  
Tom stopped and listened, and down he knelt:  
'Ha! little lads! So it was you I smelt?  
What a mousy smell! Well, the dew is sweet,  
So drink it up, but mind my feet!  
The lintips laughed and stole away,  
but old Tom said: 'I wish they'd stay!  
The only things that won't talk to me,  
say what they do and what they be.  
I wonder what they have got to hide?  
Down from the Moon maybe they slide,  
or come in star-winks, I don't know:  
Once upon a time long ago

Just like Tom Bombadil himself, the lintips merely are. What and why is not told. And nor can it be told, as it seems that the lintips are apparently one of those rare things in Tolkien's writings – published and unpublished – that, along with the mewlips featured in the poem "The Mewlips" and the cats of Beruthiel and the names of the Blue Wizards, remain unexplained.<sup>425</sup> Nowhere in the vast numbers of jottings, manuscripts and scribbled notes (a multitude of objects that, even if it were limited to writings traceable to Tolkien's hand, is continually expanding, as the 2015 rediscovery of an annotated map is proof of) is there any information about the lintips; theirs is a life unwritten.<sup>426</sup> And the lintips, unlike the mewlips, who in imagery and atmosphere belong to a familiar set of haunting horrors and bogeymen, are a strange breed. Tom's failure to comprehend and communicate with the lintips is often interpreted as a sign of his diminishing power, having once been the "Eldest" remembering "the first raindrop and the first acorn" (131) he is now no

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<sup>425</sup> Kris Swank discusses different possible etymologies, but finally concedes that "if Tom doesn't know what the lintips are, the rest of us can only guess". Kris Swank, "Tom Bombadil's last song: Tolkien's 'Once upon a time'", in *Tolkien Studies* 10, 2013

<sup>426</sup> A map was found in a copy of *The Lord of the Rings* that once had belonged to illustrator Pauline Baynes, who incidentally made the illustrations for *The Adventure of Tom Bombadil*. The map had been annotated by both Baynes and Tolkien, in preparation for the 1970 edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, illustrated by Baynes. Guardian 23 October 2015



longer attuned to his environment. The lateness of the composition (most likely the poem was written around its publication) is read against Tolkien's advanced age, as corroborating such an interpretation.<sup>427</sup> However, it could instead be argued that this late poem retroactively establishes a limit to Tom Bombadil's power of knowledge that had been there from the beginning. This limit is insisted on repeatedly in the Council of Elrond as well as by Goldberry and Tom himself. Furthermore, this is what is indicated by the passage quoted from the letter to Peter Hastings. The lintips emerge as an exteriority whose totality cannot be totalized in a holistic version of environmentalism. Rather, they reveal how Middle-earth is composed of an ecology of intersecting media systems, each comprising a world, and each perhaps merely – as Tolkien notes regarding Tom Bombadil – a discordant oddity on the circumference of the other.

In a sense, the lintips foreshadow the shapeless and sublime horror with which Frodo and his three friends are confronted as they are lured into the lair of the Barrow-Wight in the chapter following upon leaving Tom Bombadil's house. In passing by an old burial ground, one that they have been warned by Tom to stay clear of, they are caught in a sudden fog. As the fog impedes them, the world gradually loses distinction and direction, senses are blurred, and they are inadvertently drawn into the midst of the burial mounds. Eventually the four hobbits lose consciousness. Just like the fog and the mist surrounding the Old Forest and the Barrow-Downs, the horror of the Barrow-Wight is a horror that melts into the environment, an anonymous rustling. Frodo hears it, or rather feels it, enveloped by it, waking up inside the barrow, on a slab of stone, prepared together with his friends for a ritual offering.

Suddenly a song began: a cold murmur, rising and falling. The voice seemed far away and immeasurably dreary, sometimes high in the air and thin, sometimes like a low moan from the ground. Out of the formless stream of sad but horrible sounds, strings of words would now and again shape themselves: grim, hard, cold words, heartless and miserable. The night was railing against the morning of which it was bereaved, and the cold was cursing the warmth for which it hungered. Frodo was chilled to the marrow. (141)

The synesthesia of the song is telling, its coldness not merely a metaphor – as the muddling of figurative and non-figurative language entering the Old Forest made clear – the horror of the *there is* does not take the division of the senses into consideration; instead, its irreducible exteriority calls upon a continual attunement of the sensorium. As such, the song of the Barrow-Wight emerges as an uncanny me-

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<sup>427</sup> Swank, 2013, p 190ff

dium, afforded by the environment but never coinciding with the environment.<sup>428</sup>

In the cinematic adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tom Bombadil and the episode of The Old Forest and the Barrow-downs are exempt from the narrative: they are not part of the story, external, relegated to a time outside of time. In a configuration of the media ecology of Middle-earth in which the narrative of New Line Cinema's film adaptations exerts the greatest amount of archontic force, Tom Bombadil is simply not part of *The Lord of the Rings*. But it is evident, both from the written narrative and from Tolkien's creative process, as well as from the resurfaced prose fragment "Tom Bombadil: A prose fragment" published in the 2014 edition of *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*, that Tom Bombadil has the ability to appear and disappear at will. He is, for example, absent in the 2002 *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* game made by Electronic arts under the license accompanying the films, while he is featured in the 1985 text adventure game *Lord of the Rings: Game one*, as well as in the 2002 *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Rings*, made by Vivendi in collaboration with Tolkien Enterprises, which at the time had a license to produce games based on the books. Just as Gollum and the character of the ring changes between editions, and the figure of Tom Bombadil is altered by the insertion of the new verse in *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* (as well as by the illustrations accompanying the 1962 edition), it is by no means unthinkable that versions of *The Lord of the Rings* are published – perhaps even as printed books – omitting Tom Bombadil. And considering how the narrative is configured from the beginning, in an agency distributed between different agencies, the otherness of Tom Bombadil seems to imply precisely such a possibility. He, and the lintips with him, are vibrant matter, an ecology of media, never "a whole, but a live torrent in time of variegated and combinatorial energy and matter."<sup>429</sup> Secrets in the archive. Murmurs in the dark. Things that merely are.

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<sup>428</sup> When Eugene Thacker notes that the fantastic, as Todorov describes it, encapsulates the uncanny aspect of media, what Thacker theorizes as dark media, that is, the fashion in which media at once upholds and erases distances, it is precisely this ecological aspect of the medium that comes into mind. Thacker argues that media in general are constituted by a liminal and paradoxical state, characteristic of the uncanny: "The function of media is no longer to render the inaccessible accessible, or to connect what is separated. Instead media reveal inaccessibility in and of itself – they make accessible the inaccessible – in its inaccessibility." Alexander R. Galloway, Eugene Thacker, McKenzie Wark, *Excommunication, Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p 96

<sup>429</sup> Fuller, 2005, p 173

## Chapter 3:

# The Many Marvels of Miracleman

Shazam!

*Whiz Comics* #2 (1940)

Kimota!

*Marvelman* #25 (1954)

Since its conception in the 1930s the American comic book superhero has been one of the most pervasive and ubiquitous cultural forms for picturing and probing the interstitial realm of the fantastic. Perhaps nowhere else today is the explicit relation between commodification and creativity as intricately intertwined. Not only has the notion of the superhero become an integrated part of Western thought – a modern mythology equally suitable for marketing purposes as for political debate – its ramifications within contemporary culture would also seem to point to the untenable condition of the modern constitution as described by Latour: continuously generating purified market categories, the superhero always retains a trace of the other, a distinct mark of system-environment hybridity. In its very essence the superhero is posthuman; whereas the concept of the superhero functions as a vessel for both tenets within the posthumanities debate, lending itself to the superhuman autonomy of transhumanism as well as to the distributed subjectivity of ecocriticism, as a cultural form its complexities necessitate a media-ecological approach.<sup>430</sup>

The following discussion on superhero comics will take as its starting point the comic book *Miracleman*, published by the California-based publisher Eclipse Comics between 1985 and 1993 (Figure 37). Initially published in the British anthology magazine *Warrior* under the title *Marvelman*, *Miracleman* is considered one of the creatively most innovative titles of 1980s superhero comics.<sup>431</sup> Illustrated by British artists Garry Leach, Alan Davis, Dave McKean and Mark Buckingham together with

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<sup>430</sup> This is, as has been noted earlier, Hayles' distinction of the field of posthumanism. See also N. Katherine Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer, Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p 1-3, and Chapter 3. The tendency towards a disembodied, autonomous, anthropocentric humanism within the transhumanism field of posthumanism is also what makes Haraway reluctant to use the term. See Haraway, 2016, p 13.

<sup>431</sup> Jeremy Larance argues that *Miracleman* could be seen as one of the earliest examples of, or perhaps a precursor of the so called postmodern or deconstructive trend within American superhero comics in the 1980s. Jeremy Larance, "Alan Moore's *Miracleman*: Harbinger of the Modern Age of Comics", in *Works and Days* 63/64, Vol 32, Nos 1&2, 2014-2015, p 136

American artists John Totleben, Rick Veitch and Chuck Beckum, *Miracleman* was mainly written by British writers Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman, two of the most influential comic book writers to emerge in the 1980s. Bringing a critical sensibility to the superhero comic book, *Miracleman* represents one of the earliest attempts at a deconstructive reading of the history of the genre and the medium. In the following chapter it will be argued that this postmodernist intervention in the superhero genre, by incorporating and thematizing the operationally ajar closure of sympoiesis, also implies a media-ecological approach, arguing, in essence, that the American superhero should not be treated as a genre or a medium but as an ecology of structurally coupled media systems.



Figure 37: *Miracleman* #1, Eclipse comics, August 1985; *Warrior* #2, April 1982, the first of four issues to feature Marvelman on its cover; *Warrior* # 2, page 4, written in the left margin is a declaration of the genealogy of the title; *Miracleman* # 1, page 20, remediating the previous page in the American comic book format, colored

*Miracleman* tells the story of middle-age newspaper reporter Mike Moran discovering – or rather remembering – his secret identity as the superhero Miracleman, a being of immense supernatural powers. In this sense, it is an origin-story, following a well-established format in superhero comics. Mike Moran in the fictional universe of *Miracleman* is indeed gifted with a superhuman alter ego – quite literally so, he has a second, superhuman body that he can summon from a parallel universe by uttering a secret call-word: KIMOTA. But it is soon revealed that the memories of his recollected superhero identity are a deliberate fabrication, implanted as a sophisticated mind-control device by the agents of a government cold war conspiracy. Over the 24 issues published by Eclipse comics from 1985 to 1993, *Miracleman* evolves as a meditation on the ethics and politics of the superhero figure while using the superhero genre – or rather, as is argued here, the superhero media system – as a site and vehicle for investigating the function of cultural memory.

The story of *Miracleman* is set in what – apart from the sudden intrusion of a superhuman being in the first issue – seems to be ordinary reality. Prior to the emergence of Miracleman, the world Mike Moran inhabits is mundane reality; more precisely, it is the downtrodden and politically divided Britain of Thatcherism seen through the lens of left-wing social-realism. It is a Britain of early post-industrialism, politically fractured and plagued by class conflict and high unemployment. The year is 1982. Making his living as a freelance reporter, Mike Moran has been married for sixteen years, living in London with his wife Liz, who, working as an illustrator, has a steady and regular income and seems to be the one providing for the household. The couple are childless, a fact hovering as unarticulated sadness over the two. At the outset *Miracleman* explicitly contrasts the fantastic scale and epic grandeur of superhero comics with the minutiae of everyday life, situating the superhero genre in a realistic mode.

The first three story arcs of *Miracleman*, written by Alan Moore – “A Dream of Flying” (issues #1-3), “The Red King Syndrome” (issues #4-10), and “Olympus” (issues #11-16) – and collected in trade paperback (Figure 38) narrate the apotheosis of the superhero Miracleman. After discovering his true origin, Miracleman confronts and slays his creator, the evil science genius and criminal mastermind Dr. Emil Gargunza. Subsequently, two agents of the Qys, the alien race on whose technology his superhuman powers are based, arrive on Earth and target Miracleman. Nearly defeated, Miracleman is aided by a young woman, Avril Lear, who reveals herself as Miraclewoman, another of Gargunza’s secret creations, hidden even from the reach of the government conspiracy. Together with Miraclewoman, Miracleman travels to the alien home world of Qys and the two of them are charged by a council consisting of the two adversary alien empires of The Qys and The Warpsmiths with overseeing Earth, following the birth of Miracleman’s and Liz’s daughter Winter. A hybrid of alien technology and human DNA, Winter represents a new stage in human evolution, and is therefore deemed worthy of joining the interstellar community, thus forcing the aliens to treat Earth as an equal. Shortly after their return to Earth, Miracleman and his newly acquired friends are confronted by another adversary, Kid Miracleman, a previous friend and colleague turned amoral nihilist by the omnipotence of the superhuman condition. The battle against Kid Miracleman leaves half of London in ruins, causing the death of millions, before he is defeated and murdered by Miracleman. Superhumans revealed to the mundane world, Miracleman erects Olympus – an enormous pyramid reaching into the stratosphere – in the rubble of devastated London, forcing world leaders to follow his benign leadership, eradicating, by means of alien technology, all forms of social and economical injustice and inequality.

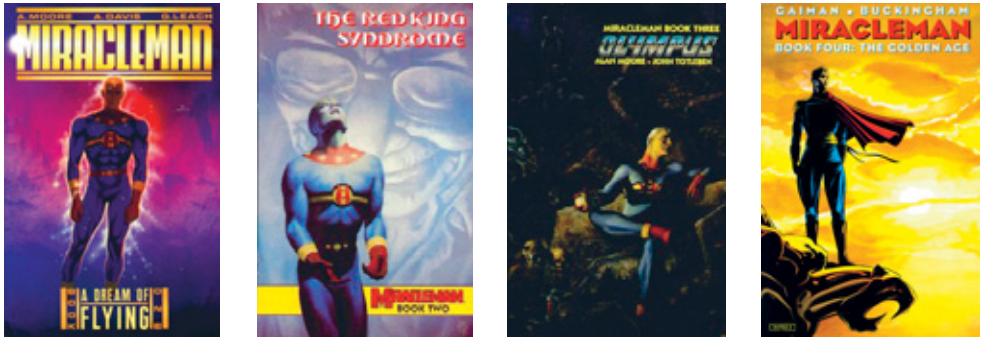


Figure 38: Eclipse comics trade paper backs: *A Dream of Flying* (1990), *The Red King Syndrome* (1990), *Olympus* (1991), *The Golden Age* (1992)

With *Miracleman* #17 (June 1990) the writing was given over to Neil Gaiman, bringing in Mark Buckingham for the artwork. Three story arcs were initially planned under Gaiman and Buckingham: “The Golden Age”, “The Silver Age” and “The Dark Age”. However, after *Miracleman* #24 (August 1993), the second issue of “The Silver Age” story arc, Eclipse comics were forced into bankruptcy and the title was cancelled.

Taken as a whole, the Eclipse run of *Miracleman* theorizes pertinent themes of the fantastic. An archaic, mythical notion of time and temporality is explicitly contrasted with a modern, historical notion of time. Myth and history are investigated when the fantastic mode of the superhero genre is inserted into the mimetic mode of realism. To some extent *Miracleman* is about making the fantastic real, building an internally coherent world where the supernatural is given a specific and coherent rationale. There are supernatural phenomena in the world of *Miracleman*, but they are restricted to a few, most stemming from the intrusion of alien technology; and even though this technology certainly represents a supernatural event, beyond empirical rationality, its consequences seem internally consistent. Politically and socially *Miracleman* strives for realism, investigating the logical ramifications of a supernatural world order and the existence of superhuman beings. Accordingly, *Miracleman* probes the ethical and political function of narration, calling attention, by the elaborate folding of different layers of narration, to the intricate relation of storytelling and history, fiction and world building.

The publication history of *Miracleman* can be described as a history of reconfiguration. While the Eclipse title *Miracleman* starts as a reissue of the *Warrior* title *Marvelman*, this title is in turn a reboot of a popular British title published by London-based publisher L. Miller & Sons Ltd in the 1950s and 1960s, created by writer and artist Mick Anglo and conceived as a deliberate version of the American superhero character *Captain Marvel*, which had been syndicated in the UK by L. Miller & Sons until the American publisher Fawcett cancelled the title in 1953. The



first five issues of Eclipse Comics' *Miracleman* reprint material previously published in *Warrior*, while *Miracleman* #6 (February 1986) incorporates new material, continuing the story that had come to a halt with the last appearance of *Marvelman* in *Warrior* #21 (August 1984). Actively engaging these transformations of both the superhero character and the specific comic book title, the rebooted *Marvelman*, and later *Miracleman*, explicitly situates a thematic discussion of the powers of fantasy and imagination in the environment of the American superhero comic.

The following chapter will trace the many movements of *Miracleman*. This will involve treating *Miracleman*, amongst other things, as a comic book title, as a commodity protected by copyright and as a character in a superhero narrative. Accordingly, the investigation will treat a diverse number of objects and agencies involved in the creation of *Miracleman*, cutting across domains and levels of distinction, sketching, as it were, a heterogeneity of emergence. But most of all, the purpose of the present chapter is to trace this emergence *in action*. Just as in the previous chapter, this involves both situating a participatory aesthetics in specific narrative segments and looking at the structural coupling of media systems in a much broader context, materially as well as historically. The argument is also essentially the same as it was in the previous chapter. *Miracleman* functions as a second-order observation system, establishing its supernatural – superheroic – secondary world in the form of a perception-event in which the reader participates. In order to theorize this embodied experience, it is necessary, as it was in order to theorize the participatory aesthetics of Tolkien's secondary world, to approach the concept of genre – following Derrida's discussion of participatory genres – as a media system, and more precisely, as an ecosystem. To this extent, it will be argued that the comic book *Miracleman* functions – aesthetically, as well as commercially and culturally – by continuously configuring the environment from which it emerges. And just as in the previous chapter, this process of recursion establishes a tension between autopoiesis and sym-poiesis, between archive and ecology, where attempts to regulate the history of *Miracleman* – both as a commodity and as a narrative – merely seem to open up new configurations. In conclusion, it will be argued that this dynamic between archive and ecology in *Miracleman* affects and is affected by the system of superhero comics in general. Understanding the participatory aesthetics of *Miracleman* is therefore instrumental to understanding the ontogenesis of superheroes.

## 1. Brief history of the American comic book superhero

In many ways *Miracleman* is a salient example of a revisionary superhero narrative, a metacomic where the explicit relation to the history of the superhero comic book is of central importance to the narrative. *Miracleman* investigates the media-ecological function of cultural memory, showing how world building is a matter of involving



the reader in writing and deconstructing history. It is deeply involved in the history of American superhero comics, a history that is traditionally divided into two distinct periods of creativity, the 1940s and the early 1960s, often referred to as the golden age and the silver age respectively. After the remarkable success following Superman's appearance in *Action Comics No 1* (June 1938), the market for masked superheroes exploded in America. Sales and profits were astoundingly high and new titles based on the Superman formula proliferated, establishing an industry whose creative limits largely came to coincide with copyright laws.<sup>432</sup> Thus the golden age of the 1940s saw the appearance of an immense number of new superhero characters and titles, most of which have been forgotten and are largely ignored by historical overviews, although some titles are still running, such as *Captain America*, *Batman*, *Wonder Woman*, *Flash* and *Green Lantern*.

Golden age superhero comics have a clear debt to pulp literature and pulp magazines, blending different popular genres and often published in anthology formats. Emerging in the backwaters of Roosevelt's New Deal, this first wave of superhero comics generally took a working-class perspective, while at the same time catering to the power fantasies of the disenfranchised, particularly young people and immigrant workers.<sup>433</sup> During the Second World War, superhero comics became deeply invested in the Allied war effort, to some extent becoming part of the American propaganda apparatus, a legacy that has since lingered on.<sup>434</sup> By the mid-1950s superhero comics had lost momentum. Sales plummeted. Politically and ideologically, the United States took a conservative turn under Eisenhower, fuelling a general mistrust

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<sup>432</sup> One of the first characters based on *Superman* was Fox Comics' *Wonder Man*, created by Will Eisner and appearing in *Wonder Comics No 1* (May 1939). See Gerard Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), p 148

<sup>433</sup> "By pointing out the failings of local government and the dangers of provincial demagogues, these comic books endorsed the need for outside intervention and tacitly stressed a common interest between public welfare and a strong federal government. In this context, superheroes assumed the role of super-New Dealers." Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), p 24

<sup>434</sup> The politics of golden age superhero comics are not as clear-cut as the blatant patriotism and uncritical American imperialism of many of the titles published during the war years might seem to indicate. A large part of the anti-Nazi propaganda prior to Pearl Harbor came from a liberal perspective and out of solidarity with the peoples persecuted under Nazi rule. Captain America, clearly the archetype of a patriotic superhero, was not created at the behest of the Office of War Information, but as way for comic book writers Joe Simon and Jack Kirby to "wage a metaphorical war against Nazi oppression anticipating the real American war they believed was inevitable." Wright, 2001, p 36. Notwithstanding this small measure of idealism and solidarity, after the American declaration of war superhero comics were largely a question of demonizing the enemy, deploying racist and imperialist discourses. "By insisting that the enemy was absolutely evil and deserving of no mercy, comic books tacitly invited support for Allied policies like the demand for unconditional surrender, the strategic bombing of civilian populations, and the use of the atom bomb." *Ibid.*, p 55

towards youth culture.<sup>435</sup> Comics, particularly horror comics and crime comics, but as the epitome of the medium, superhero comics as well, were targeted, infamously in Fredric Wertham's *The Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), as detrimental and corruptive. As a response the Comics Code Authority was created in 1954, a system for self-censorship that lasted, in a modified version, until the early 2000s.<sup>436</sup> Culturally, the early 1950s saw the appearance of television in many American homes, a medium that in just a couple of years seems to take over the segment of young readers that earlier had purchased comic books.<sup>437</sup>

Following the seeming inability of superhero comics to appeal to the young readers of the 1950s, the early 1960s saw a period of creativity that succeeded in doing precisely that. Dealing with situations more relevant to adolescents, and against the backdrop of cold war policies, Marvel Comics created a line of new titles that spoke to the moral ambiguities and anxieties of the atomic age as well as adhering to the individualism and anti-authoritarianism of 1960s youth culture. Rather than being marketed for children, titles such as *The Amazing Spider-Man*, *X-Men* and *The Incredible Hulk* were targeted at teenagers and college students. In addition to dealing with real-life situations, interspersed with fantastical adventures, the silver age titles of Marvel Comics took a novel approach to world building and the aesthetics of seriality. No longer dwelling in the "oneiric climate" described by Umberto Eco in his essay "The Myth of Superman", the Marvel titles established a coherent continuum, where characters and storylines evolved over time. In this sense, silver age superheroes were less entangled in the paradoxical time of golden age heroes, where, argues Eco, the irreversible destiny of mythological narrative, a time of events having always already unfolded, clashes with the sequential temporality of plot progression.<sup>438</sup> However, the development of silver age comics did not completely abandon the oneiric climate of the superhero. Although allowing storylines to evolve over time, the commercial logics of the superhero franchise

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<sup>435</sup> Jean-Paul Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men, a Cultural History of American Comic Books*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), p 180

<sup>436</sup> The late 1940s and early 1950s saw a general hysteria concerning youth culture and popular culture. Several unrelated fatal incidents involving children prompted a nationwide campaign against comic books, largely forefronted by psychologist Fredric Wertham, who claimed that "problem children were all readers of comic books" and that comics books were a threat to all children, emotionally well balanced or not, "because the magazines presented them with a model on which they ran the risk of self-identifying." Gabilliet, 2010, p 230. Calls for censorship have been resurging over the years, and the comics code was revised after its initial implementation in 1954 before being dropped completely, as Amy Kiste Nyberg discusses. See Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: the History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), p 129ff

<sup>437</sup> Gabilliet, 2010, p 47

<sup>438</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p 114

demanded the at least potential perpetual continuation of successful titles.

## Revision and postmodernism

By the early 1980s the rise of alternative American comic book publishers and the establishment of direct sales via comic book specialty stores were having an impact on superhero comics. Influenced by the underground Comix movement of previous decades and by the success of the magazine *Heavy Metal*, an American syndication of the French magazine *Métal Hurlant* initiated in 1977, the role and status of creators changed.<sup>439</sup> Writers and illustrators were now increasingly viewed as artists sought after in their own right, carrying titles, rather than the other way around.<sup>440</sup> Influences from other comic book cultures such as the Japanese and European comic book markets were also making an impact on the American industry. Most prominent was perhaps the so-called “British Invasion” in the early 1980s, likened sometimes to the influence on American pop music from British artists in the 1960s.<sup>441</sup> The comic book writers and artists moving from a British environment to an American in the 1980s usually came from the political-satirical milieu of anthology magazines, such as *2000AD*, *Action* and *Warrior*, where serialized adventure, science fiction, fantasy and superhero titles were meshed and hybridized within a punkish, DIY aesthetics. Criticizing the innate imperialism of the superhero mythos, where American comic book publishers had often implemented a monologic structure to their storylines, in part as a commercial strategy, in part to strengthen copyright, writers such as Alan Moore, Grant Morrison, Warren Ellis and Neil Gaiman, emphasize and aesthetically operationalize instead the polyphonic aspects of the superhero mythology.<sup>442</sup> It is from this environment that a new kind of self-reflexive and historically aware superhero comic emerges, influenced by deconstructive and postmodernist theories and defined by Geoff Klock as the revisionary phase of superhero comics. Drawing on Harold Bloom’s theories of poetic influence, Klock contextualizes the emerging revisionary superhero narrative, “not in the sense of a revisionary history, but in the sense of Bloom’s strong poetic revision through misprision: it is the wish of the revisionist to find an original relation to truth.”<sup>443</sup> A revisionary comic, argues Klock, not only establishes a new continuum for

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<sup>439</sup> See Gabilliet, 2010, p 80-97, for a discussion on the sociological changes of the comic book industry.

<sup>440</sup> Particularly Chris Claremont’s and John Byrne’s work on *X-Men* and Frank Miller’s work on *Daredevil* stand out. See Wright, 2001, p 262-267

<sup>441</sup> Ben Little, “2000AD: Understanding the ‘British Invasion’ of American Comics”, in Mark Beringer, Jochen Ecke, Gideon Haberkorn (eds.), *Comics as a Nexus of Cultures, Essays on the interplay of media, disciplines and international perspectives* (Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2010), p 140

<sup>442</sup> Karin Kukkonen and Anja Müller-Wood, “Whatever Happened to All the Heroes? British Perspectives on Superheroes”, *Ibid.*, p 155f

<sup>443</sup> Geoff Klock, *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* (New York: Continuum, 2002), p 16

a particular story, it imposes this continuum as truth, as the only and original time continuum possible. The oneiric climate of the superhero here becomes aesthetically operational, as the paradoxes of competing temporalities and contesting versions of events are actively stressed as the basis from which new narratives, and new histories, are made truthful.<sup>444</sup> It could be argued that the revisionary comic stresses the emergence of aesthetic experience as a distributed subjectivity. Klock's persuasive and thoroughly argued thesis focuses on poetic influence but although he has a firm grip on the intertextual intricacies of the history of superhero comics, highlighting how a potentially self-referential stance is endemic to the form, his investigation still treats each revisionary title as an autonomous work of art, thus focusing more on the meaning production of each title vis-à-vis its history than on how this meaning production is made possible. Thus influence in Klock's investigation is treated as a hermeneutic category rather than seen as part of the medium. Rightly pointing out the rhizomatic structure of superhero comics, Klock mainly dwells on interpreting individual narratives.

## Metacomics

In his discussion of the postmodernist aesthetics of 1980s American superhero comics, comics scholar Orion Kidder argues that an emphasis on reader involvement is indicative of a particular kind of superhero comics that he labels "metacomics": "I conceive of metacomics as self-referential and I argue that at their most extreme, my particular sample of comics – from America, in the early-eighties to the present, largely made by British artists, which have been called "Revisionist" comics – dissolve the perceived boundary between the comics and their audiences."<sup>445</sup> The self-referentiality of metacomics generates a metafictional suspension of belief, putting the nature of the narration into question. However, this does not mean, argues Kidder, that the immersion of the reader is ruined: rather, "self-referentiality draws the audience in by creating a relationship between that audience and the creators and/or the comic book itself."<sup>446</sup> In *Miracleman* this effacing of the boundary between comic book and audience is to a great degree achieved by explicitly referring to the publication history of the title. By reassembling the different media systems pertinent to the emergence of *Miracleman*, the reader becomes one of many distributed agencies involved in the experience generated. The use of metafictional techniques in *Miracleman* denaturalizes the narrative and brings the construction of reality into question, generating and presupposing a participatory reader. The reader is involved in the construction of the narrative, on both a thematic and, as will be discussed later, a material level.

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<sup>444</sup> Ibid., p 54

<sup>445</sup> Orion Ussner Kidder, "Telling Stories about Storytelling: The Metacomics of Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, and Warren Ellis", diss. Department of English and Film Studies, University of Alberta, Edmonton, 2010, p 29

<sup>446</sup> Kidder, 2010, p 43

While Klock discusses comic books and comic book creators that actively engage with the history of the medium from a humanist understanding of subjectivity, the following chapter on superhero comics will steer the discussion towards a non-humanist understanding of subjectivity, highlighting the participatory character of superhero comics. The participatory aspects of superhero comics can be located on several different levels. On the one hand, comic books are a participatory medium. Practically all studies on the aesthetics of comic books agree on this point. Reading comics is a matter of participating in the construction of meaning, materially and corporeally as well as hermeneutically. But it could also be argued – as in the following – that the general material-cultural environment of superhero comics is characterized by participation and collaborative creativity, albeit usually in the form of a serialized industrial approach, where production technologies as well as distribution and ownership becomes relevant factors, often as relevant as the artist and writers involved. Thus, beside well-known creative agencies such as colorists, letterers and editors, marketing strategies and print technology have also been highly influential in shaping the superhero comic book as a cultural form. But there is also a long-established tradition of readership feedback and fandom collaboration. And, as the discussion of *Miracleman* will make clear, throughout the history of superhero comics questions of copyright and other legislative matters have been active in establishing it as a cultural and commercial system. Thus, rather than discussing the superhero comic as a genre or a medium, the example of *Miracleman* will show that the aesthetics of superhero comics is always a question of several different intersecting media systems, both materially and discursively, at any given moment. It is not only a matter of theorizing the reading practice of the comic book as a material medium, nor understanding the publishing culture of the American comic book industry during the 1980s; rather, in order to properly engage the participatory aesthetics of the superhero comic book, it is necessary to understand the ecology of these intersecting media systems. *Miracleman* explicitly stresses the distributed subjectivity of this ecology, upholding it as an essential and integral part of ontogenesis.

## 2. Comic books and meaning

As sites for distributed cognition, all media are participatory media, to paraphrase W. J. T. Mitchell.<sup>447</sup> That is to say, meaning emerges not as a signal to a receiver but entails, as has previously been argued, a cybernetic, or rather, an ecological feedback between the system and environment of the medium. It is perhaps, as N. Katherine

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<sup>447</sup> Mitchell, in the essay “There are no Visual Media”, argues that since all media are mixed media, both from a sensorial and semiotic point of view, talking about visual media is for the most part misleading. W. J. T. Mitchell, “There Are No Visual Media”, *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol. 4(2), 2005, p 257

Hayles argues, five centuries of Gutenberg print culture that has indicated otherwise, treating texts and meaning as autonomous and transcendental objects.<sup>448</sup> However, when dealing with comic books, a print-oriented aesthetics, stressing autonomy and transcendental meaning, has never really been an alternative. This is, very probably, one of the reasons why the aesthetics of comic books has received very little critical attention, save during the last twenty years approximately. One other reason, clearly, is that comics have largely been a question of popular culture, however that nebulous concept is defined. Comic books, much like other media ostensibly blending several forms of expression such as picture books and illustration, have simply not suited modernist hermeneutical tools for the analysis of aesthetic and cultural objects.

## Sequence and closure

Initially the study of the aesthetics of comic books has been, like any new discipline, occupied with defining the field. A number of definitions of comic books have been suggested, generally stressing one of two elements as characteristic of the form: sequence or hybridity.<sup>449</sup> Two influential arguments for the importance of sequence have been proposed by comic book artists Will Eisner and Scott McCloud. Eisner argues that comics should in fact be considered a “sequential art”.<sup>450</sup> By stressing the sequence between panels as constitutive for the medium, Eisner emphasizes progression and temporality as the essential tenets of comics. Scott McCloud follows Eisner in stressing the importance of panel progression, defining comics as an art of “closure”, in which the reader actively takes part in constructing the narrative.<sup>451</sup> McCloud locates the gutter in between panels as the interstitial space where this closure takes place. Comics as an art form, argues McCloud, hinges on discrete units of meaning separated by a discernible, albeit not in itself meaning-bearing grid, organizing the potential configuration of these units. It is in this sense that comics constitute an “invisible art”: it emerges as an art form only when a reader brings together the visual information of two discrete units in a temporal sequence. The essential temporality of the sequence is not visually represented, other than as a gutter.

Eisner and McCloud highlight two important aspects of reader participation that are ethical in kind. Eisner argues that the sequence of comics is largely a matter of control, steering the reader towards a given experience, essentially forcing a submission to the system, while McCloud sees reader participation as a co-production of meaning on (more) equal terms, as a system of meaning production emerging

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<sup>448</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), p 31ff; N. Katherine Hayles, “Print is Flat, Code is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis”, in *Poetics Today* 25:1 (Spring 2004)

<sup>449</sup> See Kidder, 2010, p 22-29

<sup>450</sup> Eisner, Will, *Comics and Sequential Art* (Guernville, Cal.: Eclipse, 1985), p 5

<sup>451</sup> Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), p 64

through participation. “The most important obstacle to surmount”, says Eisner, “is the tendency of the reader’s eye to wander. On any given page, for example, there is absolutely no way in which the artist can prevent the reading of the last panel before the first.”<sup>452</sup> Convention and page progression naturally impose a certain measure of sequential control on the narrative; the exact reading sequence, however, is always an open matter.<sup>453</sup> Comics require a given response from the reader in order to properly generate sequence; in this sense, comics stress the participation of a configurative textuality. While this participatory response is materially and conventionally specified, the comic book medium is also largely explicit about the conventions and materiality involved. Inasmuch as comics need to exert sequential control on their readers, they do so by making the act of sequence a matter of participation and closure. Comic book page layout controls and structures reading, by convention and by the media specific materiality of the comic book. To some extent this is true of all (cultural) objects, that they materially and conventionally affect interpretation. However, it could be argued that the configurative structure of comics is highly accentuated, compared to other narrative media such as film and literature. In comics, control and participation mutually emerge in a distributed perception.

## Comics as mixed media

Discussions on the hybridity of comics usually focus on the relation between words and images. Although certainly the most obvious ones, words and images are not the only two modes of meaning-making involved in comics – far from it. While Eisner and McCloud concentrate on sequence, both arguing that comics without words are perfectly viable, they also recognize comics as an art form involving several forms of expression. Eisner shows how a comic in “pantomime” can function by relying heavily on iconography, in this sense pitting the iconicity of images against the symbolic order of a language-like system.<sup>454</sup> And clearly, design and page layout are all integrated parts of the hybridity of comics as a meaning-making system.

A productive approach to the hybridity of comics is found in W. J. T. Mitchell’s discussions on images and text. Mitchell criticizes the totalizing claims of semiotic media studies and interart studies alike, arguing that both the scientific stance of a master-narrative of semiotics and the practice of comparison are fallacies.<sup>455</sup> Com-

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<sup>452</sup> Eisner, 1985, p 40

<sup>453</sup> “The (western culture) reader is trained to read each page independently from left to right, top to bottom. Panel arrangements on the page assume this. This, ideally, is the normal flow of the reader’s eye. In practice, however, this discipline is not absolute. The viewer will often glance at the last panel first. Nevertheless, the reader finally must return to conventional pattern.” *Ibid.*, p 41

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid.*, p 16-23

<sup>455</sup> Mitchell, 1994, p 86-89



paring different forms of expression can at best highlight the contextual character of experience, delineating meaning production as a social practice; it does not serve as a method to establish the purity of an art form or a medium. “The image/text problem is not just something constructed ‘between’ the arts, the media, or different forms of representation, but an unavoidable issue *within* the individual arts and media. In short, all arts are ‘composite’ arts (both text and image); all media are mixed media, combining different codes, discursive conventions, channels, sensory and cognitive models.”<sup>456</sup> Furthermore, Mitchell notes, there is the risk that comparative methods of understanding media ignore “other forms of relationship, eliminating the possibility of metonymic juxtapositions, of incommensurability, and of unmediated or non-negotiable forms of alterity.”<sup>457</sup> In an essay on ekphrasis, Mitchell argues that there is no difference between how words and images function, materially, however, as in any other aspect, there are considerable differences between words and images.<sup>458</sup> Mitchell therefore advocates an approach to media that focuses on materiality, addresses media as a system within an environment, as a “vague middle ground between materials and the things people do with them”<sup>459</sup>. Media here becomes a matter of participation: “The medium does not lie between sender and receiver; it includes and constitutes them.”<sup>460</sup>

## **The system of comics: arthrology and braiding**

The most thoroughgoing attempt to treat comics as a system is Thierry Groensteen’s semiotic work, presented primarily in the *The System of Comics* (1999) and *Comics and Narration* (2011). Groensteen stresses the sequential character of comics. Although he wishes to avoid presenting an essentialist definition of comics, noting that such definitions inevitably lead to normative claims and historical prejudices, he argues a foundational principle for comics: “their common denominator and, therefore, the central element of comics, the first criteria in the foundational order, is *iconic solidarity*.”<sup>461</sup> The function of comics is narrative, argues Groensteen, and narration in comics is primarily a question of the iconic information represented in the panels of the comic book page. Verbal information also has a function and place in the articulation of meaning, of course, but there has to be a protocol regulating a

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<sup>456</sup> Ibid., p 94-95

<sup>457</sup> Ibid., p 87

<sup>458</sup> Ibid., p 161

<sup>459</sup> Mitchell, W. J. T. , *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), p 204

<sup>460</sup> Ibid., p 204

<sup>461</sup> Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Ngyen (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2007), p 13, p 18

relation between images. Iconic solidarity is defined, Groensteen continues, “as interdependent images that, participating in a series, present the double characteristics of being separated – this specification dismisses unique enclosed images within a profusion of patterns or anecdotes – and which are plastically and semantically over-determined by the fact of their coexistence *in praesentia*.”<sup>462</sup>

Groensteen locates two general operations necessary to the production of meaning in comics. On the one end, comics function as a system of fragmentation, of spatially ordering different units of meaning in relation on the page. This Groensteen calls the spatio-topical system of comics, within which he presents a comprehensive list of media specific units: the panel, the frame, the page and the word balloon and so on. But the spatio-topical system of comics also includes the specific site on the page, the page layout and the superimposition of images over one another – “an apparatus which I will designate as the *inset*”<sup>463</sup>. It stands to reason that the spatio-topical system is limited only by the set of realized comic books. On the other end, says Groensteen, the production of meaning in comics is a question of configuration, of assembling a narrative from the discrete units of the spatio-topical system. Groensteen calls this operation *arthrology*, from the ancient Greek, meaning articulation.<sup>464</sup> Arthrology in turn is divided in two types: restrained arthrology and general arthrology. Both of these, just like the spatio-topical system of comics, can function in a variety of ways, but the main difference between them is that restrained arthrology deals with the way sequence is ordered on the level of page layout, whereas general arthrology deals with the emergence of the comic book as a network. The active participation of the reader is emphasized in both cases of arthrology. Criticizing the fetishization of the gutter, rightly pointing out that a simple line between panels or overlapping images may well have the same semantic function, Groensteen argues, leaning on Wolfgang Iser’s reader-response theory, that it is a site of participation, structuring the narrative: “Between the polysemic images, the polysyntactic gutter is the site of a reciprocal determination, and it is in this dialectic interaction that meaning is constructed, not without the active participation of the reader.”<sup>465</sup> However, perhaps the most acute form of participation – mainly because it seems to imply a limitless set of possible configurations – is enacted on the level of general arthrology, in an operation Groensteen calls braiding. Braiding, says Groensteen, involves an understanding of the comic book as a network and allows associative connections to be made throughout the whole of the network,

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<sup>462</sup> Ibid., p 19

<sup>463</sup> Ibid., p 86

<sup>464</sup> Ibid., p 21

<sup>465</sup> Ibid., p 115

regardless of direction or place. Thus braiding treats every part of the comic book as potentially in a relation of iconic solidarity: “Contrary to breakdown and page layout, braiding deploys itself simultaneously in two dimensions, requiring them to collaborate with each other: Synchronically, that of the co-presence of panels in the surface of the same page; and diachronically, that of the reading, which recognizes in each new term of a series a recollection or an echo of an anterior term.”<sup>466</sup> The disposition towards a linear and irreversible development of narration associated with the printed book is to a large degree “embattled”, argues Groensteen, by the system of comics, and particularly by the braiding of general arthrology: “With respect to comics, this disposition finds itself constantly embattled, and in a certain measure neutralized, by the properties that we have seen in the panels. The network that they form is certainly an oriented network, since it is crossed by the instance of the story, but it also exists in a dechronologized mode, that of the collection, of the panoptical spread and of coexistence, considering the possibility of translinear relations and plurivectoral courses.”<sup>467</sup>

Groensteen’s notion of braiding and general arthrology clearly aligns to the movements of affect that was discussed earlier, in Chapter 1, as integral to an aesthetics of media ecologies. Thus the “translinear relations and plurivectoral courses” of braiding correspond to the rhizomatic movements across the phylum of machinic assemblages, and to this extent the system of comics that Groensteen describes, is an ecosystem that regulates structural coupling. As has been pointed out repeatedly, this means theorizing cognition as distributed and reader participation as embodied. Although such a move towards a non-humanist and non-hermeneutical model of participation is implied by Groensteen’s system, it is nevertheless not explicitly taken. Once this is done, however, general arthrology and braiding become a model for prefiguring the configuration of meaning within media ecologies.

## Cognitive narratology

Approaching comics from the perspective of cognitive narratology, Karin Kukkonen offers a model that in many aspects seems to converge with a media ecological model. According to Kukkonen, the meaning-making practices of comics are not merely a matter of having knowledge of a certain set of contextually determined codes and being able to combine these, as semiotic studies of comics argue.<sup>468</sup> The narratology of comics, Kukkonen claims, is not based entirely on a set of conven-

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<sup>466</sup> Ibid., p 147

<sup>467</sup> Ibid., p 147

<sup>468</sup> Karin Kukkonen, *Contemporary Comics Storytelling* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2013). Chapter 1, “How to analyze comics cognitively”, deals with the cognitive approach.

tions. Rather, according to cognitive narratology, a large part of reading comics hinges on the cognitive faculties intertwined with human corporeality. These faculties are in part grounded in the senses and the body, but it is also a question of applying, subconsciously, the so-called conceptual metaphors that structure culture: “Conceptual metaphors are basic patterns of thinking that seem to underlie our everyday metaphorical expressions.”<sup>469</sup> While comics contain a set of “iconographic patterns, such as superhero costumes and symbols, that need to be learned”, the majority of the visual signs used by comics are either cross-cultural or universal, or are such that are easily accessible. “From this cognitive perspective”, Kukkonen argues, “reading comics works not so much because it implements a semiotic system or because it draws in readers’ comics competence, but because the meaning-making comics solicit ties in with our basic cognitive buildup.”<sup>470</sup> Based on the notion of conceptual metaphors, Kukkonen argues for a more complex and dynamic understanding of the meaning-making of comics than that offered by code-based semiotics. The conventionality of comic book signs, such as the speech bubble, does not constitute a code necessary to appropriate prior to reading, nor does reading a comic book entail a deliberation between the symbolic and the indexical, in Peirce’s terms, but rather, Kukkonen argues, it is based on conceptual metaphors, tying the meaning-making to a much larger cultural context. “Thus, even what seems a medium-specific convention of comics, such as speed lines or speech bubbles, does not require a learned competence of the comics code in order to be read, because it ties in with basic cognitive processes.”<sup>471</sup> Cognitive narratology presupposes that fiction works by generating storyworlds. Comics narrate by providing visual clues from which readers infer and construct a mental model of the story world. “What we see in each panel presents enough clues to locate the action in a particular scene as well as to identify changes in setting. In other words, it allows readers to construct the story world within which the characters move and within which events take place.”<sup>472</sup> This argument is primarily based on the notion of mimesis as a game of make-believe in which a reader participates willingly. If perception and cognition generated by individual functions in comic books always refer to and are regulated by the system in Groensteen’s analysis, and even more so in other semiotic systems of comics, such as the one hinted at by Umberto Eco, Kukkonen sees her approach as more attuned to the specific and singular meaning-making functions of a particular object: “In my pragmatic approach, any kind of clue can elicit different in-

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<sup>469</sup> Ibid., p 19. Kukkonen borrows the concept of conceptual metaphors from George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003 (1989)), p 6

<sup>470</sup> Kukkonen, 2013, p 21

<sup>471</sup> Ibid., p 20

<sup>472</sup> Ibid., p 42

ferences, depending on their context.”<sup>473</sup> Reading comics cognitively, as Kukkonen proposes, clearly caters to the complex dynamics of the many intersecting media systems involved in the semiosis of comics. However, it is also clear that cognitive narratology, as well as semiotic and neo-semiotic theories of comics, fails to properly address the interplay of materiality, embodiment and participation central to a non-humanist approach to the comic book medium. Reader-response theories and sensual cues notwithstanding, in Kukkonen’s understanding of comics, just as in Groensteen’s, the involvement of the reader is always unidirectional, from a position of exteriority. Cognitive theory, as Kukkonen proposes it, claims an autonomous notion of human subjectivity and sensuality, while its explanatory force moves from the semi-transcendental realm of conceptual metaphors down to the individual object of interpretation.

## Cryptomimesis

A media-ecological approach to the meaning production of comics focuses on reading as an event of distributed cognition. The reading situation here becomes not only a matter of interpreting, as an autonomous and disinterested subject, a foreign body of information, but also a matter of corporeally becoming the perceptions and experiences produced by the material properties of the comic. Comics scholar Julia Round’s approach to the participatory and embodied aesthetics of comic books, and its relation to the fantastic, can be informative here. Round argues that comics are an innately metanarrative form of narration, in which the stylized art of comics “creates a self-conscious alterity; one that is depicted with conscious falsity, and can reinforce fantastic content. As such, *every* world in comics is an alterity, no matter where it claims to be.”<sup>474</sup> Drawing on discussions on the complex and hybrid structure of comics, particularly Groensteen’s theories, and the deconstructive narratology of Carla Jodey Castricano, Round situates the medium of the comic book as a haunted medium. Using Castricano’s notion of “cryptomimesis” – where Derrida’s reading of the linguistic sign as trace and haunting remainder is prefigured as crypt, that is, both hiding and evincing by encrypting the signified<sup>475</sup> – Round argues that “we can perceive a gothic structure within comics as the medium presents its narrative in a non-linear form (where all moments coexist on the page), combined with embedded story arcs and diegetic artifice.”<sup>476</sup> The braiding of general arthrology here becomes part of the spectral temporality of comics, where connecting panels and pages, as well as titles, mark the reader as situated between the previous and the subsequent one. This

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<sup>473</sup> Ibid., p 25

<sup>474</sup> Julia Round, *The Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), p 82

<sup>475</sup> Carla Jodey Castricano, *Cryptomimesis* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), p 13f

<sup>476</sup> Round, 2014, p 22

entails, argues Round, a participatory reader. However, Round's notions of participation, while stressing the haunting of Derrida's deconstruction of subjectivity, is nevertheless more aligned to Iser's theories of filling in gaps and the function of the wandering viewpoint as structuring matrix for the interaction between text and reader. Though stressing embodiment, and relating the gothic mode of comics to Bakhtin's concepts of the grotesque and the carnivalesque, the relation between reader and work is conceptual, and not material. Ultimately, the haunting of the comic book refers to the meaning content of the diegesis. The gutter as crypt has the function of hiding and encrypting the inside of the panel, which is that part of the diegesis that cannot be shown to the reader. Using Foucault's concept of the archive, Round argues that reading comics "becomes an enactment of the archive that allows for different responses structured by *a priori* knowledge and the text's positivity and surrounding discourse."<sup>477</sup> Although this concept of the archive invites, as has been noted earlier, a non-humanist notion of participation, Round nevertheless stresses participation as a question of constructing, by interpretation, the text as meaning structure.

While Round's approach has many merits, criticizing a general systems approach to comics, and highlighting embodiment and material heterogeneity as important aspects of comic book narration, it nevertheless prefigures, as the unshown content of the crypt evinced, a comic book narrative as a closed system of meaning, whose specific organization also determines the environment to which it applies. In this sense, it is an operationally closed system, and participation is a question of interpretation. Nevertheless, just as Cary Wolfe argues a neocybernetic impetus within deconstruction, and just as the discussion in Chapter 1 on reader participation in the theories of Iser, Eco and Barthes noted an affinity to an ecological understanding of participation, it could be argued that Round's notion of the haunted spaces of comics, by its clear convergence towards a media-ecological approach to the aesthetics of the fantastic, also marks the point at which a modern, liberal humanist concept of subjectivity draws the line. It simply cannot conceive of embodiment as more than a metaphor. However, as will be argued in the following, participating in the meaning production of *Miracleman* is not merely a matter of filling in the gaps or taking part in a process of hermeneutics, however haunted it may be; it also involves the ontogenesis of an embodied perception-event. To this end, *Miracleman* stages the sympoiesis of superheroes.

### **3. Miracleman 3D Special: material-historical context**

When approaching *Miracleman*, it soon becomes evident that on every conceivable level it is an object in transition. A mere glance reveals that there is no one stable text

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<sup>477</sup> Ibid., p 102

to investigate, no autonomous or sharply delineated narrative to interpret. It takes only the quickest overview of the material to realize that *Miracleman*, both as a narrative and as a production history, contains multiple, parallel temporalities and different, quite often contradictory chronologies. Furthermore, at least concerning the *Miracleman* episodes previously published as *Marvelman* in *Warrior*, two different systems for producing, distributing and reading comics converge, as do two different formats: the American comic book and the British anthology magazine. There is also the genealogy of the character to be considered: the deliberate and accidental presence of Mick Anglo's *Marvelman* and Fawcett Comics' *Captain Marvel* within the pages of *Miracleman*, and the fact that Alan Moore, previous to the Eclipse title *Miracleman*, had created a character called "Miracleman" as a version of Anglo's *Marvelman* for the Marvel UK title *Captain Britain*.

Figure 39: *Miracleman 3D Special* (Eclipse, 1985)

It would appear then that every investigation of *Miracleman*, even at the very beginning of the title, starting with the first issue, would find itself in the middle of an ongoing event. Thus an investigation of *Miracleman* would always happen *in medias res*. To this extent, the *Miracleman 3D Special* published by Eclipse comics with the cover date December 1, 1985, will therefore serve as a starting point for such an investigation (Figure 39). As a media object, the *Miracleman 3D Special* traces not only the historical circumstances pertinent to its publication; it also, and to a large degree, traces and prescribes the history of the genre and the medium of the superhero comic book. This particular comic book will therefore take on the function of an archeological site, laying bare the interplay between the materiality of the medium and its meaning-making practices. Setting aside for the moment the fact that we are dealing with a 3D comic book, entailing a certain protocol and corporeal response from the reader, the narrative of *Miracleman 3D Special* opens with a short, two-page prologue entitled "Saturday Morning Pictures". In this prologue two cleaners arrive at a desolate bunker in the English countryside to tidy up after what has apparently been a cataclysm of devastating proportions. This bunker, a massive underground science facility, is devoid of living beings, and among the rubble and remnants of what appear to be scientific





experiments on alien and supernatural beings, the two cleaners encounter a set of videotapes, chronologically dated but otherwise unlabeled. Hoping for some sordid entertainment – “Cross your fingers and hope it’s not bloody ‘Annie’ or something” – they randomly pick a cassette labeled 1958-1959. The tape shows an adventure featuring a superhero called Miracleman, which is not at all to the liking of one of the cleaners. His physical appearance and comments on family life places him as the older of the two, and he resignedly comments “Oh, triffic. It’s Mighty Mouse” (Figure 40).



Figure 40: Miracleman 3D (Eclipse, 1985)

After these two framing pages, an episode follows called “Miracleman and the Exiled Gods”, a time-traveling adventure in which Miracleman, together with the mythological hero Hercules, thwarts a conspiracy against Zeus. At the close of this short episode, the narrative returns to the frame story, where the older of the two cleaners – immersed in his job of transporting a two-headed skeleton – comments, en passant: “What a loada drivell. My four year old wouldn’t have been able to watch that without weeping”. The younger cleaner then plays a cassette from the 1960s, and the comic book accordingly moves through another three episodes of Miracleman adventures: “Miracleman and the Dreams”, “Miracleman and the Foam Fanatic” and “Young Miracleman and the Moon of Doom”. Coming to a stop, the two cleaners, on the last page of the comic book, reflect on what they have been watching, evaluating the videos against the backdrop of contemporary (that is 1980s) entertainment. “I was enjoying that”, says the younger of the two, continuing, “the special effects were good, weren’t

they? Considering when it was made.” The older cleaner responds: “I dunno. Not as good as Superman!” and gets the retort “Well, no. But better than Superman II.”

### **Reprint and remediation: historiographic metalepsis**

It is quite clear that the *Miracleman 3D Special* comments on the superhero genre as an established frame of reference, with a theoretical distinction as well as a distinct history. The framing story explicitly discusses the fantastical aspects of superheroes; more interestingly it situates this discussion within the context of immersive media, where cinematographic special effects hold a historically prominent position but where naturally the 3D-effects of the actual comic book in question enact the argument on a corporeal and material level. The reading practice of 3D comics situates the superhero genre within the context of immersive media. But there is also, and equally important, a history generated by the episodes represented by the videocassettes in the framing sequence. Within the storyworld of *Miracleman*, as it is written in 1985, they form part of the narrative; they comprise important aspects of the personal history of the superhero character *Miracleman*, and as such, they have a diegetic function. But they also inform of the history of the comic book published in 1985 entitled *Miracleman 3D*, and accordingly have a metanarrative function.

In the publication sequence of *Miracleman* the *Miracleman 3D Special* is chronologically situated between *Book One: A Dream of Flying*, by Alan Moore, Gary Leach and Alan Davis, published by Eclipse as *Miracleman # 1-3*, and *Book Two: The Red King Syndrome*, by Alan Moore and Alan Davis, beginning with *Miracleman # 4*. However, the four episodes represented by the videocassettes in the framing sequence are reprints, and in this case also remediations in 3D, of episodes of the British comic books *Marvelman* and *Young Marvelman* written by Mick Anglo in the 1950s and 1960s. The publication history of *Miracleman* takes on a narrative function here. It is largely the historicity of the Mick Anglo episodes of *Marvelman* and *Young Marvelman* that is used within the fiction, and more precisely it is the manner in which these episodes are typical of *Marvelman* – and to some extent also of the superhero genre – at a certain given time that is of relevance. Inscribing this historicity into the narrative, into the story world of *Miracleman*, fictionalizes the publication history of the comic book. A historical fact becomes a fictional fact. The result is a kind of metalepsis – a historiographic metalepsis – enfolding not only two distinct moments in time, but at the same time transgressing the borders between the fictional and the real. The narrative effect is both disruptive, reminding the reader of the artifice of the narration, and immersive, turning the historical context of the material – and hence the situation in which the reader participates – into fiction.

Both stylistically and pertaining to subject matter, the four episodes of *Marvelman* reprinted in the *Miracleman 3D Special* are typical of the superhero genre in

the 1940s and 1950s. The first episode “Miracleman and the Exiled Gods” enacts a plot with characters from classical Greek and Roman mythology, playing on the engagement of the superhero genre in subjects of mythology and in particular alluding to the connection of Miracleman to Captain Marvel, one of the earliest superheroes to be explicitly modeled on classical mythology.<sup>478</sup> The other three episodes in *Miracleman 3D Special* – “Miracleman and the Dreams”, “Miracleman and the Foam Fanatic” and “The Young Miracleman and the Moon of Doom” – focus explicitly on another prominent theme of golden age superhero comics, science fiction. Here, various pseudo-scientific devices – space ships, atomic warheads, supereffective detergent foam and hypnotic dream machines – form the basis of adventures as fantastical as they are whimsical. In this manner, the *Miracleman 3D Special* materially situates the *Miracleman* reboot in its historical context. Not only does it play on the cultural memory constituted by the superhero genre, a memory its readers to some degree take part in as a knowledge of generic conventions, the reprint and remediation – and in fact renaming – of the *Marvelman* episodes also constitute a material trace of the historical transformations of both the superhero genre and the *Miracleman* character. Tracing these different transformations, the following section will map a diverse amount of intersecting agencies – both material and discursive – in the production history of *Miracleman*.

## The multiple origins of Miracleman

In August 1985, the independent American comic book publisher Eclipse, under editor Catherine Yronwode and publisher Dean Mullaney, initiated the publication of *Miracleman*.<sup>479</sup> The first six issues contained reprints of material Alan Moore had made together with Gary Leach and Alan Davis for the British anthology magazine *Warrior*. In *Warrior*, the comic was published under the title *Marvelman* and was conceived as a 1980s reboot of the 1950s British superhero character *Marvelman*.<sup>480</sup> The name change of the comic in the American publication was due to legal circumstances, partly prompted by the 1984 publication of *Marvelman Summer Special*, the British comic book on which the *Miracleman 3D Special* is based, when Marvel Com-

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<sup>478</sup> Captain Marvel first appeared in *Whiz Comics*, published, for reasons of trademark simultaneously as *Thunder Comics*, no. 3 in 1940.

<sup>479</sup> Eclipse was an independent publisher in the sense that it was not controlled by one of the two American comic book publishers at the time, Marvel or DC comics. The first issue of *Miracleman* has the cover date August 1985.

<sup>480</sup> *Warrior* editor Dez Skinn and Alan Moore were working under the assumption that they had acquired the rights for the title from Anglo, an assumption that later proved erroneous. George Khoury, *KIMOTA! The Miracleman Companion* (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2001), p 15

ics threatened legal action against the British publisher Quality Communications.<sup>481</sup> Instead of risking litigation, Eclipse comics chose to alter the name when bringing *Marvelman* to the United States.<sup>482</sup> In this sense, the creation of *Miracleman* – as opposed to merely reprinting *Marvelman* – was prompted by judicial necessity. In turn, *Marvelman*, the original comic book title on which Alan Moore based his reboot, was born out of a similar necessity. Created by British artist Mick Anglo in 1954, the comic ran in three titles in the UK for almost a decade: *Marvelman* and *Young Marvelman*, both on a weekly basis with 346 issues each from 1954 to 1963, and the *Marvelman Family Special* with 30 monthly issues from 1957 to 1959.<sup>483</sup> The impetus for creating the *Marvelman* titles came from British comic book publisher Len Miller of L. Miller & Sons, who since 1946 had been publishing black and white reprints of the American comic book title *Captain Marvel*. Ever since Fawcett ceased publishing *Captain Marvel* in 1953, after settling a lawsuit initiated by National Comics (later to become DC Comics) more than a decade earlier, there had been no more new material for L. Miller & Sons to reprint. Rather than simply folding its publication, the publisher and Mick Anglo quickly decided to provide new material themselves. For obvious reasons the title *Captain Marvel* could not be maintained. The name “Marvelman” was considered appropriate, capturing the essence of the character that the readers of *Captain Marvel* had become accustomed to.<sup>484</sup> The backstory was changed in a number of salient areas but kept close enough to its original to be recognizable. Captain Marvel’s alter ego Billy Batson became Micky Moran, keeping the alliteration and the diminutive name, and rather than working as a radio broadcaster, he became a newspaper reporter. The origin of the character’s superpowers was given a pseudo-scientific explanation rather than a magical one; instead of being given the powers of mythological creatures by the wizard Shazam, Marvelman was transformed by scientist Guntag Bargholm by the force of atomic powers. The transformative word uttered by the hero was subsequently changed from “Shazam” to “Kimota” (“atomic” phonetically backwards). Captain Marvel’s two sidekicks, Captain Marvel Jr. and Mary Marvel, became Young Marvelman and Kid Marvelman.

## Warrior Magazine

The 1980s rebooted superhero character Marvelman first appeared in the premiere issue of *Warrior* in March 1982. Writer Alan Moore and artist Garry Leach presents here a middle-aged Mike Moran, out-of-shape and submerged in the everyday mi-

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<sup>481</sup> Excepting an episode featuring the character Big Ben, the *Miracleman 3D special* is an exact reprint in 3D of *Marvelman Summer Special* published by Quality Comics, summer 1984

<sup>482</sup> Khoury, 2001, p 7

<sup>483</sup> Derek Wilson (ed.), *Marvelman Classic Volume 1* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2010), p 9

<sup>484</sup> Marvelman, 2014

nutiae of adulthood. When the story opens, Moran is on an assignment covering the opening of a new nuclear power station in the Lake District. Plagued by migraine and the backwash of a recurring dream, he suddenly finds himself entangled in a terrorist take-over (Figure 41). Pressured and nauseated, Mike Moran is on the brink of collapse, when, through the window of a glass door, he catches a glimpse of the dream word that has been lingering on the fringes of his conscious mind all day: “Suddenly the word is there, swimming before him, blurred through the fog of pain and nausea, but as recognizable as destiny...”<sup>485</sup>



Figure 41: Alan Moore, Gary Leach, *Marvelman*, in *Warrior* #1, Quality Comics, March 1982

Uttering the transformative word, Mike Moran remembers that he is *Marvelman*, freed at last: “Eighteen years, trapped in that old, tired body.” Swiftly he disposes of the terrorists and flies triumphantly into outer space before returning to his wife, who, quite understandably, is perturbed by the transformation. As the story progresses, *Marvelman* in *Warrior*, and later *Miracleman*, as published in the US by Eclipse Comics, traces the logical consequences of Mike Moran’s transformation, investigating the ramifications of being a real person, with real, everyday problems, while at the same time having near omnipotent, superhuman powers.<sup>486</sup>

*Warrior* was conceived of by editor Dez Skinn as a creator-owned magazine, where

<sup>485</sup> Alan Moore, Gary Leach, *Marvelman*, in *Warrior* #1, Quality Comics, March 1982, p 9

<sup>486</sup> Framing the superhero narrative against the conventions of realism is one of the most salient practices of revisionary comics. However, the relation between realism and fantasy in revisionary superhero comics is not unproblematic. It is not a matter of simply embedding the fantastic in a realist discourse, a move that would in Todorov’s terms transform the fantastic into a story of the uncanny. Rather, as Orion Kidder argues, in order to resolve this tension, revisionary comics become metacomics. Recognizing that superheroes inherently defy conventional realism, while still employing conventions of realism, revisionary comics employ a mode Kidder defines as self-reflexive verisimilitude. Self-reflexive verisimilitude, Kidder says, “is a mode in which self-reflexivity itself is that which indicates reality.” Kidder, 2010, p 92

the creators had copyright to their own material and accordingly took some part of the profits while participating in its mode of production.<sup>487</sup> Prior to launching *Warrior*, Dez Skinn had been working as an editor at Marvel UK, reprinting American material for the British market but also working with and developing several domestically produced titles. To a large extent *Warrior* seems to have been created as a deliberate version of American comics in general, and the Marvel UK titles in particular. “So instead of Captain Britain”, Skinn explains, “we had Marvelman. Instead of Night-raven, we had V for Vendetta. Instead of Absalom Daak, a character we created for the *Doctor Who* comic, we had Axel Pressbutton. And instead of Conan, we had Shandor. We took the formula, the key ingredients of Marvel and put them in a very traditional British style comic, an anthology.”<sup>488</sup> The decision to reboot Mick Anglo’s Marvelman seems to have had several origins. Dez Skinn needed a superhero for his anthology and preferred to work with an already established character, and Marvelman, being a popular and well-selling British superhero, was the obvious choice. The fact that there was a large number of extant comic books to reprint seems to have further supported the decision.<sup>489</sup> As for commissioning Alan Moore for the project, accounts differ. Prior to the publication of *Warrior* Alan Moore had stated in an interview for *The Society of Strip Illustrators Journal* that rebooting Marvelman would be a dream project for him: “My greatest personal hope is that someone will revive Marvelman, and I’ll get to write it. KIMOTA!”<sup>490</sup> However, Dez Skinn had also been working with the idea at around the same time, and it was not until comic book writer Steve Moore mentioned that he had a friend who would die for the opportunity to bring back Marvelman that Skinn got in touch with Alan Moore.<sup>491</sup> Garry Leach was then contracted to do the artwork, redesigning the visuals of Marvelman, adding a detailed and contemporary style more in line with the independent British comic book magazine environment of the early 1980s. *Warrior* was published, like most British comics at the time, in black and white, and in a magazine format slightly larger than the American comic book format. From *Warrior* #7, published in November 1982, Alan Davis, who had been working together with Alan Moore on the Marvel UK comic book title *Captain*

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<sup>487</sup> Khoury, 2001, p 38

<sup>488</sup> *Ibid.*, p 38

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid.*, p 39

<sup>490</sup> Eric L. Berlatsky, *Alan Moore: Conversations* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), p 7

<sup>491</sup> Dez Skinn claims that he had Alan Moore working on spec: “So I said to him he could go ahead and write an episode on spec. If I published it, I would pay. If I didn’t he’d get nothing. He had to take the risk, as an unknown quantity. So that’s what happened. I saw it and it was brilliant, so it was down to Steve. If Steve hadn’t recommended Alan, if he had said, ‘Yeah, I’ll take the job’, it would be Steve Moore who’d have done Marvelman.” Khoury, 2001, p 41 Alan Moore tells the story a bit differently, “And then around that time comics entrepreneur Dez Skinn had also been thinking about reviving Marvelman. He must have seen the thin in SSI Journal and asked me if he could secure the rights to Marvelman for a new comics magazine that he was planning and would i be prepared to write it.” *Ibid.*, p 12





Figure 42: Alan Moore, Gary Leach, *Miracleman* #1, Eclipse Comics, August 1985

*Britain*, took over the artwork, after it had become clear that Garry Leach's detailed style was too time consuming for the publication pace. Davis continued working on *Marvelman* until its last appearance in *Warrior* # 21 in August 1984.

### **American syndication: Pacific, Eclipse and Marvel Comics**

Never a commercial success, *Warrior* gained much critical acclaim from the outset, and plans for American syndication were soon put in motion. Although a number of British titles were at the time seeing reprints in the US (such as *Doctor Who* and *Judge Dredd*), both Marvel and DC declined to publish the *Warrior* titles, mainly, it would seem, on account of there being trademark issues carrying a title like *Marvelman*.<sup>492</sup> In the end, a business agreement for the American rights to the main bulk of the *Warrior* titles was made with independent comic book publisher Pacific Comics, though prior to publishing any of these titles, Pacific Comics filed for bankruptcy and the newly started publisher Eclipse Comics subsequently acquired the rights. During the procrastinated process of getting American syndication, *Warrior* ceased publishing *Marvelman* and Alan Davis left the title.<sup>493</sup> Eclipse Comics changed the title and published the *Warrior* material, colored and re-sized in accordance with American comic book standards, in issues 1-6 of *Miracleman* (Figure 42).

<sup>492</sup> Dez Skinn states that DC Comics declined on account of not being able to carry a comic book that figured their main competitor in its title, having already had enough trouble with the Captain Marvel titles. Marvel, on the other hand saw difficulties carrying a title with the implicit assumption of representing the whole company. *Ibid.*, p 45

<sup>493</sup> The reasons for this being a conflict between Davis and Moore over the American publication of the *Captain Britain* storyline the two had worked together on, and which Moore opposed, disagreeing with Marvel Comics mode of production and contracts with its creators. *Ibid.*, p 43, p 68.



This material comprised the concluded first story arc of *Marvelman* “Book 1: A Dream of Flying” and just more than half of the second story arc “Book 2: The Red King Syndrome”. Halfway through *Miracleman* #6 (February 1986) the second story arc was continued, now with artwork by Chuck Beckum. Beckum lasted only two issues, working for Eclipse on *Miracleman* #7 (April 1986) and *Miracleman* #8 (June 1986). The story arc “The Red King Syndrome” was then concluded in *Miracleman* #9 (July 1986) and *Miracleman* 10 (December 1986), with artwork done by Rich Veitch. The artwork of the third story arc of *Miracleman* – “Book 3: Olympus” – was subsequently done by John Totleben, who had been working together with Alan Moore on the DC Comics horror/superhero title *Swamp Thing*. “Olympus” ran from *Miracleman* #11 (April 1987) to *Miracleman* #16 (December 1989). With *Miracleman* #17 (June 1990) Neil Gaiman took over as writer, bringing in Mark Buckingham for the artwork. Gaiman and Buckingham had three story arcs planned: “The Golden Age”, “The Silver Age” and “The Dark Age”. However, with Eclipse filing for bankruptcy in 1993, *Miracleman* 24 (August 1993), the second issue of “The Silver Age” story arc, became the last issue to be distributed.

Apart from the main title *Miracleman* and the aforementioned *Miracleman 3D Special*, Eclipse published *Miracleman Apocrypha* 1-3 (November 1991, January 1992 and February 1992), figuring short stories outside the main continuum, made by various writers and artists. Trade paperback editions of the four completed story arcs were also published prior to Eclipse’s bankruptcy in 1994, following which, Todd McFarlane, who had co-founded Image Comics in 1992, bought all of Eclipse’s assets. However, since the rights to *Marvelman/Miracleman* were divided between the publisher and the creators, McFarlane could not use any of the material pertaining to the title. Prolonged litigation followed, mainly involving McFarlane and Neil Gaiman, to whom Alan Moore had signed over his part of the copyright. In 2009, Marvel Comics announced that they had acquired the rights to *Miracleman* as well as Mick Anglo’s 1950s and 1960s *Marvelman*, and subsequently initiated a reprint of *Miracleman* in 2014, largely following the publication sequence of Eclipse comics while doing art restoration and adding new colors. The Marvel Comics publication of *Miracleman* concluded the three Alan Moore story arcs with *Miracleman* #16 (Marvel Comics, May 2015). Marvel Comics published the first story arc, “The Golden Age” by Neil Gaiman and Mark Buckingham in 2015, while plans for publishing the concluding two story arcs (including the material produced for, but never published by Eclipse) were postponed early 2016, after *Miracleman The Golden Age* #6. Publication of the last two story arcs of *Miracleman* is planned to commence again in 2017.

## Copyright, analogues and multiverses

Enfolded in the *Miracleman 3D Special* are the historical layers of the superhero comic book. On the one hand, there are the people traditionally involved in creating comic books: editors, writers, artists, letterers, colorists, inkers, printers, and so forth. This is already a complex media system, with a creativity distributed within a collective. But there is also, within the superhero comic book publishing system, the long-established function of a fan community feedback loop, where the comic book industry has been adjusting its output in accordance with the preferences of its readership. This feedback presents itself on different levels and to varying degrees, from the editorial and letter columns to the emergence of direct sale and comic book specialty stores in America in the 1970s.<sup>494</sup> On the other hand, it would seem that the collective creativity of *Miracleman 3D Special* also includes factors not ordinarily considered agents at all. It is clear, for instance, that juridical circumstances are deeply enfolded within the creativity of *Miracleman*, from the initial lawsuit filed against *Captain Marvel* in 1940 by National Periodicals to the threat of litigation by Marvel Comics in the mid-1980s and to the controversies between Todd McFarlane and Neil Gaiman in the 1990s and 2000s. Thus copyright emerges as a considerable contributor in the creative agency of *Miracleman*. Furthermore, *Miracleman* merges two historically and geographically distinct modes of production, namely those of American and British comics. And the significant relation between *Warrior* and Marvel UK, where, as mentioned earlier Dez Skinn had worked as editor, and where Alan Moore and Alan Davis had made *Captain Britain*, brings two different systems of production into the mix. This too bears on the question of copyright, since comic book creators in Britain have generally had legal rights to their creative output, but it also has concrete consequences for the material aspects of *Miracleman*, as the American version of the *Warrior* material is colored and resized to American comic book standards. Differences between two media systems here have a significant impact on the materiality of the product, acting as co-creator of *Miracleman 3D Special* as a cultural artifact.

The presence of *Captain Marvel* within the *Miracleman* ecology is significant. As a trace of the different histories of the medium of American superhero comics, *Captain Marvel* affects *Miracleman* in more ways than just being the explicit cultural object on which Mick Anglo modeled *Marvelman* in 1954. Exemplary of the commercial logic of the emerging comic book industry in the late 1930s and early 1940s, *Captain Marvel* encapsulates the creative strategies inherent in golden age comics. Although immediately the subject of litigation upon its launch in *Whiz Comics* #2 (February 1940), unlike other early comic books emulating the success of *Superman* and *Action*

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<sup>494</sup> Gabillet, 2010, p 71

Comics, *Captain Marvel* and its publisher Fawcett Communications were never found to be in breach of copyright.<sup>495</sup> Instead, the success of *Captain Marvel* was instrumental in establishing the legal boundaries for generating new versions of the superhero comic book formula. The creation of *Marvelman* in 1954 is partly reminiscent of this process, reconfiguring a new version of the superhero formula. However, where *Captain Marvel* establishes a sufficiently original version of the superhero format, with enough idiosyncrasies not only to have a commercial appeal of its own but also to avert claims of copyright infringement, Mick Anglo's *Marvelman* deliberately seeks to establish itself as an identifiable version of *Captain Marvel*. On its launch in the UK, the editors of L. Miller & Sons were very careful to make the point clear that *Marvelman*, for all intents and purposes, was a continuation of *Captain Marvel*, announcing on the *Captain Marvel* Club Page in *Captain Marvel Adventures* #19: "Boys and girls it is my great pleasure to introduce MARVELMAN – What? Another of the MARVEL FAMILY? – Well, yes, in a way, for you see MARVELMAN is going to step right into my shoes. He is to follow the Marvel tradition of finding and fighting evil wherever it exists."<sup>496</sup> The alleged reason given for this change was that Billy Bates, the *Captain Marvel* alter ego, needed a chance to grow up, halted as he had been in perpetual adolescence for more than a decade. The last two issues of *Captain Marvel Adventures* saw the name "Marvelman" introduced on its cover; issue #23 was entitled *The Captain Marvel Man*, while the last issue, *Captain Marvel Adventures* #24 (January 1954) came with the subtitle *The Marvelman*. Continuing the print run unbroken, the first issue of the new title, *Marvelman* #25 (February 1954), further argued the connection and identity between the two titles (Figure 43).

The creation of *Marvelman* in 1954 generates, from commercial necessity, having no more *Captain Marvel* titles to reprint, a new continuum and a new set of characters. Copyright is not taken into consideration, mainly, it would seem, because *Captain Marvel* – and the lawsuit against *Captain Marvel* and Fawcett – is regulated by American legislation, not applicable in the UK. The commercial logic of *Marvelman* here is the same, governing most golden age comics emerging after *Action Comics* and *Superman*; creating a line of products tapping into and expanding the public demand established by previous products. However, as an explicit version of *Captain Marvel*, *Marvelman* establishes itself as a fluid and configurative text, making its explicit relation to other texts one of the major tenets of its aesthetics. It is the same, but at the

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<sup>495</sup> An early precedent for copyright infringement in relation to superhero comic books and superhero characters was set by the case of *Detective Comics, Inc. v. Bruns Publications, Inc.* Bruns Publications in the spring of 1939. The case was brought against Victor Fox's title *Wonder Comics* and the superhero character *Wonderman*, a character created by Will Eisner on the behest of publisher Fox, who explicitly had ordered "another Superman" from The Eisner & Iger Studio late in 1938. Jones, 2004, p 148

<sup>496</sup> *Captain Marvel Adventures*, V. 1, # 19 (December 1953), 27



Figure 43: *The Captain Marvel Man* # 23, *Captain Marvel Adventures* # 24, advert page in *Captain Marvel Adventures* #24, *Marvelman* #25 (L. Miller & Sons)

same time it is other. This position, where the same is created anew, will be thoroughly investigated by revisionary superhero comics in the 1980s – it is largely what Klock theorizes as revision – but it is, as is made clear by the emergence of *Marvelman*, a position essential to the very creation of superhero comics as a media system, in its conception.<sup>497</sup> Investigating the revisionary comics of the 1980s, and particularly focusing on the influx and impact of British writers and artists on the American market, Orion Ussner Kidder defines this kind of deliberate version of superhero characters as *analogues*: “Analogues are individuated characters who have their own identities and narratives, but who so strongly resemble pre-existing characters that the audience regards them as commentaries on the originals.”<sup>498</sup> Analogues are a large part of how revisionary comics investigate the history of the medium, argues Kidder, situating the use of analogues in a deconstructive practice, in the self-referring and self-reflexive aesthetics of revisionary comics, and as such, analogues constitute a meta-commentary and implicit critique.<sup>499</sup> The use of analogues is arguably taken to its creative apex in Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* (1986) and is highly operational in the metacomics of the following decades. Closely tied to the creative and commercial success of revisionary analogues are the more commercially based industry strategies of rebooting and retroactively ordering an already established continuum – *retconning* – of individual superhero titles. Rather than creating a new title reminiscent of already existing titles, reboot and retcon rewrites the history of an already existing title, creating a new version while always retaining traces of what has been overwritten.

The proliferation of alternate versions of superheroes is partly connected with another salient characteristic of superhero comics often engaged by revisionary com-

<sup>497</sup> As Henry Jenkins notes, in “Just Men in Tights”, in *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero*, (ed.) Angela Ndalianis, Routledge, (New York: Routledge, 2009), p 41

<sup>498</sup> Kidder, 2010, p 71

<sup>499</sup> *Ibid.*, p 72

ics: multiverses. As alternate versions of superheroes are generated, so are alternate storylines; and even though superheroes to some extent keep dwelling in the oneiric climate inbetween myth and modernity, primarily attributed to golden age comics, by the late 1970s and early 1980s it was not uncommon, particularly among the DC-titles, to have multiple versions of the same continuum. Several attempts at reorganizing this state of multiplicity have been made over the years, and both Marvel Comics and DC Comics have presented limited events with the purpose of establishing a new single continuity, most famously perhaps in the 1985 DC Comics event *Crisis on Infinite Earths* by Marv Wolfman and George Pérez. However, in the wake of revisionary comics, the multiplicity of superhero multiverses has more often been treated as a creative asset rather than as a problem to be overcome. The reboot of *Marvelman* in 1982 makes use of the fluid textuality of multiverses and analogues, but it does so by making clear how these are already a part of the history of the title, as well as of how superhero comics function as an ecosystem.

#### **4. Immersive media: The Red King Syndrome**

*The Miracleman 3D Special* is an example of a materially immersive medium. The 3D effects generate a sensation of depth and submersion, as well as that of thickness and density. Objects seem to appear on the page, while at same time turning the very page into a seemingly solid object, impossibly thick between the fingers. The movements of reading the 3D comic book further enhance this sensation. Not only does turning the page cause a shift in focus and perspective, making things appear at different distances and generating weird geometries, but the very sensual navigation across the page, visually following the pathways of the layout, also alters the representation. Reading the comic book is tangibly an embodied perception-event, where the movements and the positions of the different agencies involved – 3D-glasses, comic book, images, words, layout, hands, eyes – constantly engage in ontogenesis, creating the world of the aesthetic object. Experience and sensation are here clearly an emergence of distributed cognition. However, it is not only the aesthetic object that is created by engaging with it. Reading the *Miracleman 3D special* – as with any 3D comic book – leaves a physical trace, a strain upon the sensorium: embodiment creates a new body. The 3D effects reconfigure the eyes, making them see differently, pushing the optical nerve and the muscles of the eye into novel territory. The agency of the medium, as invasive as it is immersive, imprints a corporeal mark, altering the eyes of the reader.

The emergence of new and strange sensibilities is one of the central themes of the superhero genre. The body becomes other. *Miracleman* has supernatural abilities, physical and mental: strength, speed, flight, near invulnerability, a vast capacity for memory and calculation, superhuman intelligence. The origins of these abilities in Moore's reboot, just as they were in Mick Anglo's *Marvelman*, are technological and scientific



in kind. But while Anglo's Marvelman had his powers given to him by a benevolent scientific genius who had discovered the magical "keyword to the universe"<sup>500</sup>, the transformation is given a more sinister explanation in Moore's version of events.

In Alan Moore's version of Marvelman/Miracleman, the origin of all supernatural elements is traced back to the presence of alien technology in the world.<sup>501</sup> Early in the 1950s an alien spacecraft crashes in the English countryside. A secret branch of British military intelligence covers up the event, and the remains of the alien crew as well as that of the ship are subsequently kept in the very same bunker that the cleaners are tidying up in the *Miracleman 3D Special* framing story. Under the guidance of the immensely brilliant and equally evil scientist Dr. Emil Gargunza this alien technology forms the basis for the Zarathustra project, a project with the purpose of creating a British superhuman soldier as the ultimate weapon in the intensifying Cold War of the 1950s. The Zarathustra project consists of supernaturally enhanced clones made from blending alien technology with the DNA of three human test subjects, three children kidnapped by the secret government agency. In Moore's version, it is these human-alien hybrid clones that comprise the three members of the Miracleman family: Marvelman, Young Marvelman and Kid Marvelman. The superhuman clones exist in a kind of stasis on a different sub-level of reality known as infra-space, a virtual plane of pure potentiality, and are transferred to the real world whenever one of the three test subjects utters a "posthypnotic keyword", supplanting the original, human identity with the superhuman identity.

During the eight years the Zarathustra project lasts, the three human test subjects are kept connected to a complex, alien technology-based, virtual reality machine in which they are fed a fantasy dream-world reality, serving as a mind-controlling device, creating a subjectivity subservient to the interests of the British military. The videotapes that the cleaners find and watch in the *Miracleman 3D Special* are recordings from this dream world. The immersive and intrusive powers of media here become an integral part of the plot and story of *Miracleman*. The textual history of the comic book character, pertaining as he is to the far from logically coherent storyworld of *Marvelman* and *Captain Marvel*, is given fictional status within the *Miracleman* storyworld. The Anglo *Marvelman* stories, reprinted and remediated in the *Miracleman 3D Special*, are contextualized as the dream-world stories fed to the three test subjects during the Zarathustra experiment. They are presented as fictions created by Dr. Gargunza with the purpose of both controlling his subjects and

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<sup>500</sup> "The Birth of Marvelman", originally in *Marvelman* # 65 with cover date November 13, 1954, reprinted in *Marvelman Family's Finest*, (New York: Marvel Comics, 2011), p 6

<sup>501</sup> In his original proposal to Warrior editor Dez Skinn, Moore stresses the importance of keeping the fantastical elements of the story to a distinctive and coherent set of logics and laws, arguing that the "fantasy in any given story should stem from one divergence from reality", in order not to "stretch the credibility of the concept." Khoury, 2001, p 24

testing the limits of their intellectual capacities. It is thanks to the immersive force of the dream machines, to which the test subjects are corporeally linked via a series of implants and sensual interfaces, that Gargunza's power over his creations is maintained. Thus the success of the Zarathustra project hinges on the transparency of the medium, its capability to generate the immediacy of a world.

In the story arc “The Red King Syndrome”, in a flashback episode in which Dr. Gargunza tells Liz Moran the background to the Zarathustra project, the importance of media transparency and immediacy is stressed.<sup>502</sup> Gargunza divulges how he invented a “pseudo-logical system” in order to control the supernatural beings he had created. Just as the sleeping Red King in *Through the Looking Glass*, who Tweedledum and Tweedledee avoid disturbing for fear of themselves being part of his dream, Gargunza must keep his superhumans barred within the pseudo-logical fantasy world of his creation.<sup>503</sup> The inspiration for this world comes from a comic book, Gargunza reveals: “One day, in the canteen, I chanced upon a flimsy, black and white children’s paper. Left there by some semi-literate engineer.” It is a copy of one of L. Miller & Sons black and white reprints of *Captain Marvel*. At first, the use of a superhero comic book universe has the sought-after effect. The three test subjects seem content with their identities as Miracleman, Young Miracleman and Kid Miracleman, engaging in flimsy adventures and battling against the evils of their adversaries. For more than seven years they happily receive the stories fed them by Dr. Gargunza. But eventually their minds, apparently evolving thanks to the alien genome, begin to resist (Figure 44).

In “The Red King Syndrome” resistance is played out as a struggle for narrative power, affecting the construction of the fantasy. Dr. Gargunza is monitoring the experiences of the Miracleman family, as events unfold in the virtual space of the dream machine, accessed through video screens – the same screens that the cleaners use years later. However, rather than Gargunza in con-



Figure 44: *Miracleman* #4 (Eclipse, 1985)

<sup>502</sup> Originally published in *Warrior* # 17, March 1984, reprinted in *Miracleman* # 4 in December 1985, reprinted by Marvel Comics in *Miracleman* #, in July 2014

<sup>503</sup> Carroll, Lewis, *The Annotated Alice: The definitive edition*, ed. Martin Gardner (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p 198



trol of the narrative, feeding his subjects with the particulars of its storyworld, the subjects are themselves taking part in the construction of the narrative, constructing a story full of metafictional references to its artificial character. “This is absolutely fascinating”, Gargunza exclaims. “Their subconscious minds are trying to overload on absurdity, to shock the brain into wakefulness by crossing the threshold of disbelief...”<sup>504</sup> Resistance here becomes a matter of participating in the construction of the narrative; instead of being a product of a singular creator or narrator, the fantasy storyworld emerges as a distributed experience, no longer under the control of one single autonomous agency but in the hands of a set of collaborative and collective agencies. The world of the simulation – of this explicit and material manifestation of the superstructure of ideology – is clearly transformed from an autopoietic system to a sympoietic system, confronting and eliding the archontic intentions of Gargunza. Stressing the heterogeneity of the environment, the accumulation of incongruous fantastical elements lays bare the configurative textuality of the narrative. Miracleman is on the verge of becoming conscious of his role as narrator, as partly in control of the narration, thus threatening to overthrow the borders of the storyworld by an act of narrative metalepsis. “By piling vampires on top of giants on top of huge fun houses”, Gargunza analytically concludes, Miracleman’s subconscious is “trying to provoke him into rejecting the whole thing as fantasy.”<sup>505</sup>

What is on the verge of being rejected is the transparency of the superhero comic book medium; its powers of generating an immersive narration is threatened. As a final counter-measure, Gargunza introduces Adversary module 390/8 “Hypnos, deacon of delirium”, and for a brief moment the validity of the storyworld seems to be confirmed once again. During a couple of panels the narrative reverts to the classical, golden age superhero comic medium that Gargunza – and Mick Anglo – based his stories on. This move is reflected in the visual style of the panels, moving away from the detailed realism of the 1980s reboot. The explanatory dialogue indicative of golden and silver age comics becomes a means of retaining the immediacy of the medium, as when Young Miracleman exclaims: “We might have known! Who else but the Nabob of Nightmares could come up with a creepy setup like this? That explains your weird sensations, M. M.!”<sup>506</sup> Momentarily the medium seems to sup-

<sup>504</sup> Alan Moore, Alan Davis, *Miracleman #4* (Guerneville, CA: Eclipse Comics, 1985)

<sup>505</sup> Ibid.

<sup>506</sup> Ibid. It is worth noting that the story arc “The Red King Syndrome” shows several discrepancies between the different editions. In *Warrior* all twelve pages of the episode are published in issue # 17, although split into two parts. In the Eclipse edition of the episode these two parts are split up, the first part published in *Miracleman # 4*, following the episode “Nightmares” originally published in *Warrior # 15* in November 1983. The second part of “The Red King Syndrome” was published by Eclipse in *Miracleman # 5*, following the episodes “The Approaching Light” originally published in *Warrior # 16*, “I Heard Woodrow Wilson’s guns...” originally published in *Warrior # 18*, and “A Little Piece of Heaven” originally published in *Warrior #20*. The chronology of the episodes is accordingly changed by

port itself, the immediacy of the dream machine is represented by the pastiche and remediation of the golden age style of *Captain Marvel* and Anglo's *Marvelman*. The effect is passing, however, as *Miracleman* violently unmasks Hypnos, revealing the face of Dr. Gargunza underneath (Figure 45).



Figure 45: *Miracleman* #5 (Eclipse, 1985)

Desperately looking for a way out, Gargunza finally disarms the threatening transgression by simply declaring, following Lewis Carroll's ending to *Through the Looking Glass*, that the whole crazy adventure had been but a dream (Figure 46). However, even though the most imminent metaleptic transpositions have been warded off – the move of Gargunza from narrator to character, and that of *Miracleman* from character to narrator – events that occurred in the storyworld of the dream machine have left a material trace in the real world. At the end of the episode *Miracleman*'s costume has changed from the visual design used in Mick Anglo's *Marvelman* to the visual design used by Garry Leach in the *Warrior Marvelman* reboot of 1982. To this extent, the episode enacts the tension between archive and ecology, and archontic and configurative textuality, discussed in Chapter 1. The change in *Miracleman*'s costume becomes an explicit remainder, a “secret” in the sense of Bogost and Derrida, pointing to the ecological exteriority of the archive.

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Eclipse in their publication. In the Marvel Comics edition of *Miracleman* this new order of episodes introduced by Eclipse is maintained in the hardback edition of the complete *Book 2*, titled *The Red King Syndrome*. However, in the single issues print run Marvel Comics have reprinted the episodes in the order they appeared in *Warrior*.



Figure 46: Miracleman #5 (Eclipse 1985)

Just Like Alice’s ruminations in the last chapter of *Through the Looking Glass*, the “The Red King Syndrome” begs the question of who is doing the dreaming. However, as the immersive medium of the dream machine cannot contain the story-world it is constructing, reality is altered. The structural coupling of Miracleman’s consciousness to the dream machine becomes organized as an ecosystem, where a new organization reconfigures the environment. The change in Miracleman’s costume is a truly fantastical event, breaching the laws of nature, made possible only through the insertion of alien technology into the natural world. But it is also a reminder that media operates precisely by this paradoxical closure, always being an alien technology altering and being altered by the organizational structure of the system with which it is coupled. In the ontogenesis implicated by the intrusion of the fantastic, the question raised by “The Red King Syndrome” is no longer who is dreaming who, but rather where and how does this dreaming emerge? And the answer would seem to be: in the medium.

The metafictional use of golden age superhero comics in *Miracleman 3D Special* and in “The Red King Syndrome” has both an immersive and disruptive effect. On the one hand, the metalepses of Miracleman and Dr. Gargunza are clues to the fic-

titiousness of the dream world created by Gargunza and shared by the Miracleman family. On the other hand, it is these metalepses that turn the dream into an ontogenetic perception-event, affecting the reality of the story world. Here, the fantastic liminality of Miracleman is not played out on the level of interpretation; it is not a matter of confronting different explanations of an event. Todorov's epistemological definition of the fantastic does not apply. This becomes all the more clear as Gargunza, in his final attempt to uphold the position of the archon, tries to achieve precisely that, namely establishing a stable explanation to the heterogeneity of the incongruous and conflicting narrative of the dream machine. Thus Gargunza's oneiric explanation to Miracleman's threatening metalepsis reads as an attempt to apply an epistemological explanation of the fantastic, in essence, an attempt to move the story from the fantastic to the uncanny. However, as Miracleman's costume indicates, it is an explanation that from the very outset has succumbed to the secret of the archive, to the active remainder of ecological sympoiesis.

## 5. Participating media systems

The *Miracleman 3D Special* is, as has been stated repeatedly, an immersive medium. It is also a medium that emerges through embodied participation. The 3D effects entail a participatory reader, willing to submit to the protocol of 3D graphics, in short, willing to wear 3D glasses and engage with the activation of the 3D effects of the printed comic book. The 3D format of *Miracleman 3D Special* accentuates the participatory character of the comic book medium. However, participatory aspects are salient on many different levels in *Miracleman*, not least in the manner in which it accesses and utilizes the ludic temporality of the oneiric climate presented by Umberto Eco in his analysis of Superman discussed earlier in this chapter. If the publication history of *Miracleman* indicates a history of collaboration and participation across different domains and orders, it is also a history that is made aesthetically operative in the comic books, of which Dr. Gargunza's remediating dream machines is an example. *Miracleman* here thematizes the American superhero comic book as a participatory media system, that is, as an ecosystem that evolves by structural coupling but that nevertheless, by the operationally ajar closure of sympoiesis, also strives for self-organization and self-generation. In this context, Thierry Groensteen's notion of braiding and general arthrology will be adapted as a model for describing how the media systems of *Miracleman* are coupled. The following section will therefore investigate narrative segments from *Miracleman*, attentive to how the general arthrology of comics actualizes a media-ecological aesthetics.





Figure 47: Cover page and first spread of *Miracleman* #1 (Eclipse, 1985)

### The abyss: second-order observation

At the very beginning of the 1982 reboot of *Marvelman*, the playtime of the oneiric climate of superhero comics is made operative. The temporality of the loop series, where the epic time of myth clashes with the novelistic time of modernity, is established here as one of the central themes of the plot.<sup>507</sup> The cultural memory and the temporality of Mick Anglo’s *Marvelman* serve as the backdrop against which Alan Moore’s and Garry Leach’s *Marvelman* emerges. This is made explicit in the Eclipse edition of *Miracleman*. In *Miracleman* #1 (August 1985) the story of Miracleman opens with a reprint, with additional dialogue by Alan Moore, of a Mick Anglo episode, “The Invaders from the Future”, not extant in the *Warrior*’s print run of *Marvelman* (Figure 47).<sup>508</sup> “The Invaders from the Future” presents the Miracleman family – Miracleman, Young Miracleman and Kid Miracleman – entangled in a playful and whimsical time paradox adventure. The totalitarian Science Gestapo, travelling from 1981 to 1956, threatens with world domination; its Atomic Storm Troopers, thanks

<sup>507</sup> Paul Atkinson discusses the uses of contrasting temporalities in *Miracleman*: “The loop series, with its unusual balance of the unchanging figure of the superhero and the timelessness of the quotidian, allows a comic to incorporate both novelistic and epic time. *Miracleman* also negotiates an agreement between the epic past, where all events have already occurred, and the uncertainty of the present but, unlike Superman, does not seek to mask their incomparability in the loop series. Instead, it addresses this issue by their exploring relationship between the historically determined bodies of mortals and the timeless bodies of gods.”, Paul Atkinson, “The Time of Heroes”, in Ndalianis, 2009, p 51

<sup>508</sup> In the Eclipse run “Invaders from the Future” becomes Chapter 1, effectively rearranging the chronology of chapters as compared to the *Warrior* material. In Marvel Comics’ *Miracleman* edition of 2014 the Anglo episode is, more accurately, presented as a prologue.

to superior futuristic technology, are rapidly conquering nations around the globe. After some initial trouble, the Miracleman family solves the situation by travelling to the future minutes prior to the Science Gestapo's departure, in effect erasing the entire timeline of the episode before it takes place. At the end of the episode, as it is reprinted in *Miracleman #1*, an eight panel sequence closes in on the face of Miracleman, while juxtaposing lines from Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: "Behold... I teach you the superman: 'He is this lightning... he is this madness'" (Figure 48).



Figure 48: *Miracleman # 1*  
(Eclipse Comics)

The concluding page and the quote reads as a comment on the revisions of superhero comics, prefiguring the critical engagement of the politics and ethics of the genre that is the main focus of Alan Moore's last *Miracleman* storyline, "Book 3: Olympus". Likewise, the line

from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, following the Mick Anglo episode, establishes time and temporality as a central theme of the narrative, explicitly linking the time paradox loop of the Miracleman family adventure to Nietzsche's concept of eternal recurrence. Of equal, or quite possibly greater, importance is how the remediation of an episode from the 1960s materially establishes the history of the character as an integrated part of the aesthetics of the reboot. The visual and narrative style of Mick Anglo functions as another level of reality against which the narrative and visual style of *Miracleman* emerges as more realistic.<sup>509</sup> To some degree, the manner in which the closing page of "The Invaders from the Future" focuses on time as repetition and

<sup>509</sup> Nathan Wiseman-Trowse discusses the reprint in its relation to both Moore's deconstruction of the superhero ethos and how it materially establishes several layers of reality. By reprinting material by Mick Anglo, *Miracleman* generates a schizophrenic effect, an ambiguity from which new continuities could be configured: "While the devoted reader might grapple with the myriad histories and continuities from *Captain Marvel* onwards Moore provides a new framework that does not so much order them coherently, but instead points to the schizophrenic nature of the character's history and the reader's implicit position in relation to that continuity," Nathan Wiseman-Trowse, (Re) placing the Original in *Marvelman*, in *Critical Engagements* 3.1, 62

immobility problematizes and questions the novelistic temporality that otherwise is one of the main themes and narrative devices with which Moore (and many revisionary comics) deconstructs superhero comics. Though being clearly structured as a grid, following the most basic of comic book reading patterns – establishing, in Groensteen's terminology, a very clear example of a restrained arthrology – the apparent lack of diegetic progression has a peculiar, estranging effect. This effect is tied to how the page invites a reading that focuses on participation in the medium. The sequence established by the eight panels of the page does not correspond to diegetic progression. Nothing happens in between panels. However, they are not identical. Each close up is not a repetition but a new version of Miracleman. With every new panel, the focus is slightly displaced, but no time elapses between the panels within the storyworld. In this sense, the page seems to support Lessing's ideological division of the temporal and spatial domains of images and words. The panels here represent purely spatial relations. Temporal progression is added by the zooming effect generated by the juxtaposition of panels. By following the protocol of the restrained arthrology of the grid, the added temporal sequence transforms the juxtaposition into a close up. It is a temporality closely tied to the eye of the reader; by alluding to the technologies of cinematography and photography, the act of seeing is metonymically situated as part of the medium. The movement of the eye, the temporality of the close up, comes to a halt in the final frame. As each panel represents an increasingly closer view of Miracleman, the representation within the panel progressively breaks down. The last panel no longer depicts any likeness to Miracleman's visage. It no longer represents any object identifiable outside the sequence. Its only connection to the previous panel is that of temporal progression, and the only way to make sense of the last panel is by viewing it as part of the close up, and thereby – metonymically – tying the panel to the temporal regime structuring the eye of the reader. Coupled to the comic book spread, the eye of the reader becomes part of an emerging sensorium, an observing system observing its own observation. The abyss staring back at itself.

Clearly, the breakdown of representation in the last panel invites a reading against the text quoted in the preceding panel, tempting to be an illumination of the madness attributed to the superman by Nietzsche, a representation of the sublime beyond representation. However, the breakdown of representation is evident only when read as a temporal progression against the preceding panel. Here, several temporalities unfold: word, image, sequence. The caption extends over several panels, imbuing them with continuity and coherence. The temporal extension of the text lingers as it offers an interpretative frame for the whole sequence. It becomes clear that words and images operate by different semiotic regimes. As does sequence. The initial panel, representing the smiling visage of Miracleman, although working within the conventions of superhero comics, still presents the image as a largely indexical or analogical



sign, establishing a measure of existential and physical connection between image and object. However, as the panel sequence progresses, this connection becomes more and more tenuous. The last panel no longer holds any physical likeness to an object external to the representation. It will only become meaningful when read in a temporal sequence. Thus the page enacts a breaking down of system into the heterogeneity of the environment. This is not, however, a concluded movement. In the different temporalities of the medium, each panel is both part of a sequence and part of an image-text constellation. While the panel sequence leads towards a differentiation into discrete meaning-bearing components, the image-text bind still enforces the potentiality of analog representation, generating a schizophrenic temporality, containing different temporal regimes. Meaning-making is thus established as a perceptual experience in a complex environment of discrete objects, as the emerging sensorium of a distributed body. This participatory aspect is further stressed in the Marvel Comics reprint of *Miracleman*. Here, the discrete particulars of the medium are emphasized as “The Invaders from the Future” episode is presented in a markedly pixelated style. The pixels of the Marvel Comics reprint accentuate the material contrast between the Prologue and Chapter 1 of *Miracleman #1*, and by remediating an antiquated printing technology, another trace of the history of the medium is added to the narrative. It is worth noting, however, that the pixels are extant only in the reprint by Marvel Comics (Figure 49).<sup>510</sup> The Mick Anglo original *Marvelman*, printed in black-and-white, did not employ pixels, nor did the coloring in the Eclipse print run.

### **Catgames: braiding metalepsis**

Understandably, in the light of the different agencies involved in the production of *Miracleman*, the narration differs to a considerable degree over the twenty-four issues published by Eclipse Comics between 1985 and 1993. Taking into consideration the changes made by Marvel Comics, recoloring and rearranging parts of the sequence of episodes, these differences between episodes, story lines and printings are further enhanced. Thus there is no one narrative style to *Miracleman*. However, as mentioned earlier, a general focus on plot-driven narration can be discerned in the first two books, focusing on temporal progression and the synchronic unfold-

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<sup>510</sup> In Marvel Comics *All new Miracleman Annual #1* (February 2015) a similar zoom-in figures as an explicit homage to *Miracleman #1*. The episode “Seriously Miraculous” by Peter Milligan and Mike Allred elaborates on the metafictional awareness of the Miracleman family established in the second book of *Miracleman*, *The Red King Syndrome*. In Milligan’s and Allred’s episode *Miracleman* begins to question the reality of a world seemingly without real consequences. The episode ends in a pixelated zoom-in on *Miracleman*’s face. Merging the two original episodes of *Miracleman*, “Seriously Miraculous”, written in 2014, becomes itself a material testament to the creativity of the media ecology of *Miracleman*, containing, as it were, a potentially infinite amount of continuities.

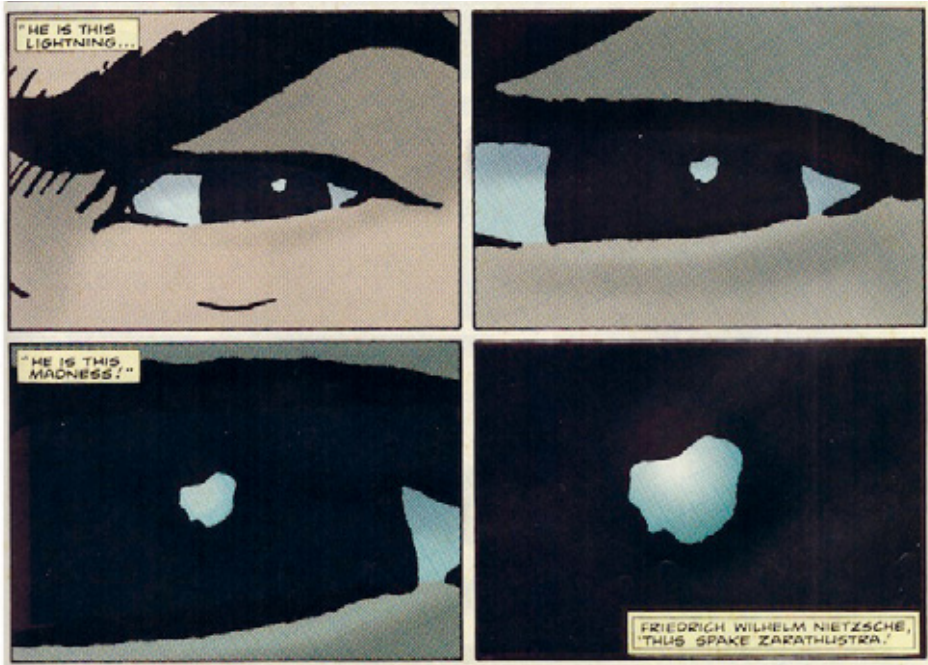


Figure 49: *Miracleman #1* (Marvel Comics, 2014)

ing of events. “Book Three” and “Book Four” are narrated from a point of temporal conclusion, where the narration has reached its endpoint, and the narrative unfurls diachronically, either in retrospect in “Book Three” or in the temporal lacunae of episodic narration in Book Four. This does not indicate that the narration in “Book One” and “Book Two” is merely a matter of unfolding plot, following conventional patterns of grid structure and sequence. There are several examples of episodes in “Book One” and “Book Two” where the narration incorporates different temporal regimes and different narrative voices, stressing the ludological and participatory aspects of the comic book. In the opening episode of “Book Two” entitled “Catgames”, consisting of six pages published in *Warrior #13* (September 1983) and reprinted in *Miracleman #4* (December 1985), a framing narrative encapsulates the unfolding of four central plotlines, metaleptically transgressing narrative space, time and voice (Figure 50). The episode opens with a stream-of-consciousness narration depicting the inner life of a jaguar being hunted by Dr. Gargunza somewhere in the jungles of South America. The following pages relate scenes involving the most important characters of “Book Two”: Dr. Gargunza plotting to capture Miracleman; Mike and Liz Moran debating the impact of the supernatural on their ordinary lives; the government conspiracy discussing the nature of the superhumans; Johnny Bates battling his evil alter ego Kid Miracleman, and Liz and Miracleman making love. Running in

the right margin throughout the six pages of the episode, the jaguar narrative cross-cuts and merges, thematically, metonymically and metaleptically, with the narration and the temporality of the depicted scenes, creating, within the confines of the six pages of the episode, the kind of networked reading pattern Groensteen discusses as the participatory braiding of general arthrology.



Figure 50: *Miracleman #4* (Eclipse 1985), p 2-3 *Warrior #13* (September 1983)

Thus the episode articulates as a network rather than as a sequence, where the different constituent parts of the narrative are all potentially in relation to each other, and thus open to configuration entailing a participatory reader. However, a strong emphasis on participation and configuration can be found on the level of page layout as well. Looking closely at the scene narrating the discussion between Johnny Bates and his evil alter-ego Kid Miracleman, the grid structure is supplanted by an open structure in the second panel, where sequence is generated by the text and the relation and form and poise of the bodies represented rather than by a grid or a gutter, turning the bodies of the represented characters into structuring principle, swirling the narration around the central figure of the nurse feeding the immobilized Johnny Bates. Here, the medium coincides with the representation, grounding the narration in the bodies of the characters. The effect is facilitated by the metaleptic transgression between the first and second panel, where the outside-inside relation of reader and representation is overturned, metonymically placing the reader in the position of Johnny Bates in the second panel. The play with eyes and gazes tying the three frames together, shifting the point of view of the narration, further stresses this metaleptic effect. In this sense, the opening episode of “Book Two” situates the themes of the narrative in the narration, in the material

properties of the narrating object, tying the sympoiesis and apotheosis of the superhero Miracleman to the sympoiesis and power struggle of the comic book as a participatory media system.

### **Olympus: autopoiesis of the superhuman**

While examples of the way the concrete comic book page entangles the reader in a distributed perception-event are found throughout the print run of *Miracleman*, a stronger emphasis on the participatory aspects of comic book narration can be discerned in “Book Three: Olympus”, written by Moore and illustrated by John Totleben. In “Olympus” Miracleman and his superhuman friends have created a utopian society, healing planet Earth by redistributing natural resources, literally moving soil and gases around the globe, mending the ecosystem, while at the same time abolishing nuclear power, warfare and finally, monetary systems. It is a world of green energy, instant communication, intellectual and religious freedom and legalized drugs, where crime and social inequalities are abolished. But as the narrative progresses, it becomes more and more evident that the utopia of Miracleman leaves increasingly little room for human agency, and that it is more and more structured as a strictly autopoietic and not a sympoetic system. At the time of “Olympus”, Miracleman has alienated and distanced himself from his bonds to humanity: ordinary people worship him as a god, his wife Liz has left him and his human alter ego Mike Moran has committed symbolic suicide, opting to dwell in the suspended non-life of sub-space rather than share existence with Miracleman (Figure 51). Here, the identity conflict endemic to the superhero genre has been taken to its extreme. Rather than as a structural coupling between two systems, the identity of Mike Moran is regulated by the autopoiesis of the deified Miracleman.

Figure 51: *Miracleman #14*  
(Eclipse, 1988)

“Olympus” narrates the end of humanism. But while there is a strong emphasis on ecology and the importance of the environment, and a non-teleological notion of posthumanism, there is also clearly a more sinister side of this new stage in human evolution:





the superhuman condition is no longer situated within an environment, but rather above it – and in the case of the actual structure Olympus, penetrating the clouds miles above London, very literally so. In “Olympus” Miracleman has become a new sensual apparatus, obtaining a divine perspective, a truly distributed cognition, transcending time and space. It is from this position that “Book Three” is narrated, and it is what allows and allots Miracleman the omniscience to narrate. But it is also a cognitive mode that is enacted, materially, throughout the book. While recollecting a chain of events, seeing Miracleman defeat, together with his allies, his adversary Kid Miracleman and eventually erect Olympus – a chain of events that clearly has a teleological trajectory – “Book Three” narrates these events diachronically. Inasmuch as the events – the narrative units of “Book Three” – are in potential relation to each other, within the network of a general arthrology, they are waiting to be activated and enacted by the reader. Participating in the reminiscence of Miracleman clearly means participating in the distributed cognition of the comic book. But it is also clear that these scattered episodes strive to form part of a concluded narrative and as such constitute a structure where the reader must fill a series of gaps according to a given trajectory, following what these distinct media systems *mean* to each other, rather than what they *do* to each other. This aspiration towards a given meaning structure is enacted through Miracleman’s deification and corresponds to the consecration of the superhero comic book as a literary form of expression. Miracleman here maps ontology rather than ontogenesis. To this extent, as will be argued in the following, *Olympus* also narrates the death – by entropy – of the superhero genre as configurative text.

Much as in the episode “Catgames”, “Book Three” is structured by framing narratives situated and unfolding in the concluded temporality of Miracleman’s apotheosis, metafictionally focusing on acts of narration and creativity. The opening pages of *Miracleman # 11* situate Miracleman literally at the scene of writing, from the top of Olympus, with stylus in hand (Figure 52). Just as in “Catgames”, the juxtaposition of different levels and functions of the narration, of diegetically differentiated narrators and voices – Miracleman in his throne room; the recurring silhouetted vignettes with Miracleman in the act of writing; the direct speech of Miracleman; the dialogue between the nurse and Johnny Bates; the direct speech of Johnny Bates – produces a temporal order where the relation between narrative units and events is a matter of configuration. The spread also cites previous segment from the series, thus transferring the general arthrology of braiding directly into the restrained arthrology of the spatio-topology of the page. The metaleptic transference of the reader into the position and perspective of Johnny Bates in the background panel redoubles the metalepsis from “Catgames”, while the grinning face of Kid Miracleman and Johnny Bates/Kid Miracleman dressed in a tie and suit refers to Chapter 3 of “Book One”, “When Johnny comes marching home”.





page. The forward trajectory of panel sequence becomes a swirling vortex, returning to its beginning as the turning of the page becomes an extension of the movement represented. The represented body dissipates into the materiality of the medium, extending to the physical body of the reader, engaging in the movements involved in reading the comic book. Corporeally involving the reader in the perception-event of reading the page, the different levels of representation demands a participatory event of configuration, where the opaque shapes and postures of Miracleman's dance extend to the movement of the reader. Instead of offering an interpretation of the represented dance, the many different units of representation involved in the page make clear how meaning emerges as a momentary distribution of positions, trajectories, and movements. Rather than reading the dance, reading becomes the dance.



Figure 53: Alan Moore, John Totleben, *Miracleman* #14 (Eclipse, 1988)

## 6. Configurative identity

*Miracleman* enforces different temporal regimes on the production of experience; different intersecting agencies that open the media object for participation are made explicit. This is done on several levels: in the actual reading of the comic book page but also in relation to the superhero genre and to the specific history of the character Miracleman. Moreover, as became clear in the short episode “Catgames”, there is also a recurring move toward a general arthrology, where an immanent network of virtual sequences is delineated.

The first story arc by Neil Gaiman and Mark Buckingham, “The Golden Age”, continues the retrospective mode established in “Olympus”, but rather than telling the

story of *Miracleman*, the narration focuses on ordinary people, investigating the impact of the supernatural on everyday life. To this extent, Gaiman moves the narrative away from *Miracleman*'s apotheosis. Operating on discordant remainders within the archontically upheld narrative conclusion of "Olympus" the "Golden Age" stresses the configurative textuality of the superhero genre whereby structural coupling is made possible, while at the same time reconfiguring the environment of the ecosystem. Several of the "The Golden Age" issues here function as direct configurations of material provided in the preceding storylines, often merely mentioned in the margin of Moore's narrative. Accordingly, *Miracleman* #17 develops a comment made on the opening page of *Miracleman* #11, while *Miracleman* #20 evolves around a eugenics program, creating superhuman babies, mentioned in *Miracleman* #16. Thus Gaiman and Buckingham establish their version of *Miracleman* firmly within the preexisting environment, further highlighting the sympoietic character of creativity in the media ecology of *Miracleman*. A modernist, liberal humanist notion of creative agency and originality is put into question, perhaps nowhere as explicitly as in *Miracleman* #19.

### The sixth Andy Warhol: appropriation in the underworld

In this episode, entitled "Notes from the underground", the character Mors, of the alien civilization Qys, whose body-switching technology formed the basis of Gargunza's Zarathustra project, has begun to retrieve personalities of the recently deceased – from trace-vibrations lingering in the fabric of reality. These personalities are subsequently given artificial bodies and are allowed to live again in a designated area in the seemingly limitless basement of Olympus. An underground, populated by the living memory of historical personalities, is created. "Notes from the underground" elaborates on a comment made by Mors to *Miracleman*, in *Miracleman*

#16, mentioning that eighteen versions of Andy Warhol have been retrieved and now take up residence in the underground. The episode is narrated by the sixth Andy Warhol, appointed by Mors as guide to the newly retrieved Dr. Emil Gargunza (Figure 54).

While the episode thematizes identity as an ecological feedback, as information retrieved by the momentary emergence of a signal in the undifferentiated



Figure 54: Neil Gaiman, Mark Buckingham, *Miracleman* #19 (Eclipse, 1990)

noise of being, it simultaneously enacts this very retrieval, reconfiguring preexisting material, whose existence is just now called into being, as a second-order observation system. In this sense, “Notes from the underground” is already written by Buckingham and Gaiman when it is first mentioned, or rather the retrieval of Andy Warhol is mentioned in *Miracleman* # 16, because the episode will be written some years later. It comes into being retroactively. Configuration manifests chronology as virtual, as an aspect of the paradoxical temporality of the operationally ajar closure of sympoiesis. Participating in an ontogenetic perception-event is precisely, as was argued earlier, taking into consideration the temporalities of the objects involved, adhering to their distinct chronologies in a relation-of-nonrelation.

The sixth Andy Warhol traverses the underworld beneath Olympus. Melancholic and somewhat embittered, he nevertheless seems stoically at home with his existence as a sympoietic configuration, his individuality an emerging effect of a structural coupling, a recursive loop between system and environment, the same but not the same as the five Andy Warhols preceding him. Gargunza, however, cannot conceive of a subjectivity that is not strictly autopoietic and in this sense – from a liberal humanist perspective – properly original. Similarly, Gargunza cannot conceive of *Miracleman* as other than the tyrant god, inaugurating his reign with patricide (Figure 55). In order to become a god, *Miracleman* simply has to kill his father, that is, he has to kill Gargunza. Here, Gargunza is trying to impose his own interpretation of the chain of events leading to his death, offering an explanation of the actions of *Miracleman*, an explanation that seems fairly plausible viewing the narrative as a whole, given its recurring critique of the superhero character, and the concomitant critique of Nietzsche’s concept of the superhumans, alluded to in the prologue discussed earlier.



Figure 55: Neil Gaiman, Mark Buckingham, *Miracleman* #19 (Eclipse, 1990)

Gargunza’s interpretation is in itself a kind of god trick, claiming the position of objective knowledge, a claim that is further substantiated when Gargunza mentions the deluded teachings of a religious group called the Moranists, who argue that



Figure 56: Neil Gaiman, Mark Buckingham, *Miracleman* #19 (Eclipse, 1990)

the world is merely a wish-fulfilling fantasy conjured by the dying cerebral processes of Michael Moran succumbing to a brain tumor. This notion is clearly a misunderstanding, claims Gargunza, not, however, without some aesthetic appeal, and adds: “Humanity denies truth in so many wonderful ways.” Here, Gargunza tries to enforce a distinct ontological version of the world in which he and Miracleman exist. What is important to the present argument is not whether this version is correct or not but rather that the gesture corresponds to a modern approach to organization. And merely by this gesture, an indication of a certain mode of reading is made, where interpretation supersedes participation. Gargunza is clearly attempting to place himself – as the mad-evil-genius-scientist but also self-made and autonomous modern man he is – in the position of the archon, comprising and at the same time organizing the archive. While highlighting the tension between archive and ecology ever present in the media system of American superhero comics, in the context of “Notes from the underground”, Gargunza’s gesture eventually proves inane, as his final attempt to escape his confinement is thwarted by the alien Mors, who, in the concluding page of the episode, returns Gargunza’s body to a storage where it is placed together with a number of identical clones (Figure 56)

The episode “Notes from the underground” is configured from preceding material, not merely elaborating on a potential story development but also reusing images



from previous issues. Throughout *The Golden Age* Mark Buckingham deliberately employs different styles and techniques, leaving each issue with a different visual expression. Using Andy Warhol's aesthetics of appropriation as a narrative tool, this strategy is even more emphasized in *Miracleman #19*. In both instances Gargunza's narration is accompanied by images taken from previous issues of *Miracleman*, materially activating the print history of the title while quoting two different visual renditions of Miracleman, those of Chuck Beckum and Gary Leach. The multiple versions of Andy Warhol, as well as the multiple renditions of Miracleman, are a playful reminder of a postmodernist critique of identity and originality, but it is a postmodernism that is taken one step further, not merely functioning as metafiction – or in Orion Kidder's words, as a “metacomic” – but more importantly grounding its critique in embodied participation. And it is an embodiment that emerges in a heterogeneous environment. As explicit simulacra, the eighteen Andy Warhols thematize the distributed agency of identity. Materially the episode remediates pictures of Warhol as well as art and self-portraits by him. But the narrative also uses other mediations of Andy Warhol as resonance. The album *Songs for Drella* (1990), a tribute to Andy Warhol by Lou Reed and John Cale, is cited by Neil Gaiman as inspiring the portrait of Warhol.<sup>511</sup> The visual referencing to Andy Warhol's art is made even more explicit in Marvel comics 2015 print run, where the colors have been arranged in the style of Warhol's grids of silkscreen colored images (Figure 57).

Figure 57: Left: Neil Gaiman, Mark Buckingham, *Miracleman #19* (Eclipse, 1990) and right: *Miracleman #3* (Marvel Comics, 2015)



The identity of Miracleman, as well as that of Andy Warhol and Dr. Gargunza, is presented as an assemblage of different constituting units, many

<sup>511</sup> “The Warhol is one of the best stories I’ve done. I had dinner with Lou Reed once in New York, and he was complaining that I had ripped him off for the Warhol episode; that I had ripped off *Songs of Drella* (Sic.). I said that I never stole a single word that I know of but I had that CD playing all the time and the whiny, slightly bitchy tone of it brought Warhol to life for me in a way that the Victor Bockris biography never did. I read the biography and thought, ‘Let’s do a Warhol story’. Listening to *Songs of Drella* (Sic.) I said, ‘Okay, I know what his voice sounds like.’” Khoury, 2001, p 120

of which are thickly layered in their own histories of production. By appropriating material, thematically and by remediation, a large number of different agencies are unveiled. Reading *Miracleman #19* thus becomes not a matter of interpretation, but of responding to these agencies. Gargunza's attempt at aligning the narrative in accordance with his own interpretation is forceful and convincing. Just like the issue itself, Gargunza's interpretation is a question of appropriating material and forming an alternative narrative that retroactively enforces a new structure on the narration. *Miracleman #19* functions here as an ecology of intersecting media systems. Although this means that many different agencies are active at any given moment and in this sense should be given the same ontological status, as an ecological organization it also allows, temporarily at least, the supremacy of some agencies over others. Any supremacy – like Gargunza's enforced interpretation – however temporal is also a question of power and as such threatens suppression. The new version of *Miracleman* generated by *Miracleman #19* clearly threatens to suppress aspects of earlier versions, just as aspects of Mick Anglo's *Marvelman* have been suppressed in the reboot, not to mention *Captain Marvel* (and, it could perhaps be argued, viewing *Captain Marvel* as an analogue, even that of *Superman*). But as has been noted throughout the present argument, configuration, even archontic configuration, always leaves a trace of participation, pointing to an exteriority beyond the organizing structure of the system it actualizes. To this extent, identity and individuation in "Notes from the underground" are ecological processes, responding to the heterogeneity of the remainder, and as such, always open to new structural couplings.

### **Secret identity: the distributed subjectivity of superheroes**

But while the materiality of the media ecology of *Miracleman* functions as a distributed agency, *Miracleman*'s identity is also explicitly thematized as a distributed subjectivity within the narrative. On the one hand, *Miracleman*'s identity consists of memories of the adventures experienced in Dr. Gargunza's immersive Zarathustra machine. These memories were generated with a specific agenda but were also – due to their lack of inner consistency – rejected, at least partly, as unreal. On the other hand, *Miracleman* shares memories with Mike Moran. The memories generated by Gargunza are deliberate fabrications. Here, the superhero takes on the explicit function of false consciousness, an overpowering agency with a specific purpose in the hands of Gargunza. Conversely, when confronted with her husband's superhero alter ego, Liz Moran uses the superhero genre as a means of investigating his personal history and deconstructing the memories implanted by Gargunza's immersive fictions (Figure 58).

Ever since the first issues, the reader has been part of constructing *Miracleman*'s identity – partly as an act of cultural memory, where the history of America comic





Figure 58: Alan Moore, Gary Leach, *Miracleman #2* (Eclipse, 1985)

book superhero has come into play and partly as an act of participatory reading, both hermeneutically, filling in gaps and responding to clues, and materially, engaging in the distributed cognition of the comic book medium. The metafictional move made by Liz Moran is indicative of the participatory aesthetics of superhero comics, emphasized by the postmodernist trend in the early 1980s. Miracleman's distributed cognition is used here as a means of investigating the problematic political and ethical aspects of the superhero genre. The realization by Mike Moran that the transformation into Miracleman is not a simple case of switching bodies, the mind remaining the same, indicates that identity is precisely a matter of distributed agencies. Memory is mutable, always open to reconfiguration. This is not, however, to be interpreted as endorsing a radical constructivist notion of memory and subjectivity. Nor is memory strictly autopoietic, in the sense that it is operationally closed. There seems rather, on the contrary, to be a clear emphasis on grounding reconfiguration in an environment, in the history of the medium, and in the feedback relation between system and environment. As has been argued throughout this chapter, the emergence of Miracleman is an act of collaboration.

This leads into the ecological ethics of the superhero, and – in extension – of the media ecology of the fantastic. Miracleman's distributed identity takes on a key function in the morally righteous struggle against his unambiguously evil adversar-

ies Gargunza and Kid Miracleman. Treating subjectivity as autonomous is clearly – within the fictional universe of Miracleman – a mark of evil. Gargunza plans to transplant his mind into another body. By this move he intends to obtain immortality. Kid Miracleman uses his position as superhuman to gain worldly power. They are both claiming the position of the archon, organizing by autopoietic self-regulation the world they create. But the relation between autopoiesis and sym-  
poiesis, between archive and ecology, is not a matter of absolute contraries, as has been pointed out repeatedly. Rather, there is always a tension, within any system, as any system is potentially open to structural couplings between the two. Once Miracleman is deified, ethics becomes ecological in a posthumanist sense. That is, ethical values are no longer based merely on human exceptionalism. However, it soon becomes clear that the ecological system of Miracleman is potentially as unbalanced as the one he has supplanted, threatened by the very apotheosis that made it possible in the first place. Thus, by the end of “Olympus”, the strictly autopoietic originality of the creator – of deification by patricide – threatens the sym-  
poiesis of the superhero, and Miracleman eventually becomes the monster he has embattled. This, however, is not the end of Miracleman, not as a character in a narrative and not as a comic book title.

### **Stasis and ecological crisis: Miracleman at the end of time**

The final issue of “Book Three”, “Olympus Chapter Six”, both thematizes and enacts an ecological power struggle – a tension between archive and ecology – within the narration. The distributed cognition and sensual apparatus achieved by the apotheosis of Miracleman – where participating in the configuration of the comic book generates a distributed experience – is threatened by submission under the privileged agency of the deified Miracleman. In a sense, the authority of the archon threatens the structural coupling of ecology. Experience is handed down as an object for interpretation, rather than as a system for participation. Unlike earlier issues, *Miracleman #16* opens with a long paragraph of text. Where Miracleman as narrator of “Book Three” previously has been visually represented within the storyworld engaged in an act of creation – writing, dancing – here, in the last chapter of the book, he emerges as a disembodied voice. From being situated within the material environment of the comic book, the narration is marked by separation. The text is isolated on the page, without interruption by images or design, a structuring monologue within the apparent heterogeneity of the comic book page (Figure 59). Furthermore, the text is presented as mechanically printed text, in clear contrast to the hand lettered text that is otherwise used throughout the comic book.

The narration strives to enforce a strict relation to the heterogeneity of *Miracleman*, both to the complex history of the character and its publication and to the dif-



Figure 59: Alan Moore, John Totleben, *Miracleman* #16 (Eclipse, 1989)

ferent media systems actualized in the spread. In this sense, the general arthrology of braiding – which could be used to describe both the aesthetics of the comic book and the aesthetics of the media ecology to which it is coupled – is reduced to a restrained arthrology, where a given narrative, a story, as Groensteen points out, functions as the ultimate guide. What ensues is a connectedness effacing the distinction between systems. Thus the images and the layout take on the function of illustrating the text, inasmuch as illustration is a true possibility. Where the spreads of earlier issues have engaged the reader in often contradicting or at least contrasting narrations with different voices and perspectives on the page, generating multiple trajectories and temporalities, *Miracleman* #16 is clearly dominated by this single structuring narration. The distributed cognition discussed in connection with earlier issues of “Book Three” is played down, the different agencies involved in the production of meaning largely conforming to the narration of *Miracleman*.

Looking at the second spread of *Miracleman* #16 (Figure 60), there is a discernable tendency to align the narration with one version of events, following a clear narrative progression. The movements of *Miracleman* over the page meet no resistance. The gridding is synchronic, imposing and affirming temporal progression. The monologue as structuring principle is even more surprising as the spread, at first glance, opens up an ideal space for play and participation. The sequence is set within the enormous edifice of Olympus, seemingly allowing the represented objects to emerge as organizing systems and, by braiding or metalepsis, folding the structure of the spread and configuring the narrative anew. As when the represented body of Huey Moon in *Miracleman* #14 configured the narrative, the spread here offers different trajectories, structuring images as potentially part of the environment of the system,

consisting of a set of discrete units, potentially in a relation-of-nonrelation. Thus the images in the “Orchard of tall screens”, taken from “the tapes of the Gargunza-crafted dreams that are [his] fifties memories”, could articulate an alternate version of events, from an alternative position. But these screens, as opposed to the earlier ones in “The Red King Syndrome”, do not seem to threaten with metaleptic transgression. Rather, they conform to the chronology of Miracleman’s monologue, representing the prehistory of Miracleman, reproducing images from the prologue in the print run of the Eclipse edition. The spread functions merely as a comment, from above, on the history of Miracleman, reaffirming his version. It is a telling of history, and the concluding movement upward would seem to affirm the rise of the archon.

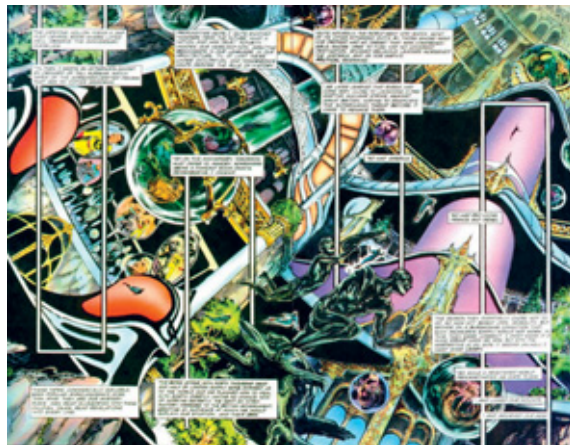


Figure 60: Alan Moore, John Totleben, *Miracleman* # 16 (Eclipse, 1989)

At Olympus, the story of Miracleman has reached its apex, the plot is concluded, time has come to an end. There are no longer any imbalances or tensions threatening the status quo, there is no more room for configuration, no way for the series to evolve and continue, there is only Miracleman’s narrative, a single version of events told from on top of the world, steeped in omniscience.

It is telling that in celebration of their new gods, and of the new world order, the people of London have gathered at the foot of Olympus, offering their objects of fantasy in sacrifice. “They made a bonfire on the wasteland that was once Trafalgar Square and on it heaped their comic books, their films and novels filled with horror, science fiction, fantasy, and as it burned they cheered; cheered as the curling burning pages fluttered up into the night; cheered to be done with times when wonder was a sad and wretched thing made only out of paper, out of celluloid.”<sup>512</sup> In the world

<sup>512</sup> Alan Moore, John Totleben, *Miracleman* # 16 (Eclipse, 1989)

of Miracleman, nothing is fantastic. Not because the existence of superhumans does not alter the fabric of reality – it does – but because world-making has ceased to be a communal undertaking. *Olympus* offers the narrative as a concluded and autonomous work of art, transforming the participatory comic book into an object to interpret rather than one to be enthralled by. The death of wonder corresponds to the death of a particular kind of reading; the fantastic here is no longer a matter of distributed cognition, no longer participation and perception, but only interpretation and meaning, power and authority. When subjectivity becomes strictly autopoietic, there seems to be no more need – or room – for ontogenesis. However, as has been noted again and again, even the strictest notion of autopoiesis will at some time or another need to account for structural coupling and the emergence of system-environment hybrids; and Miracleman – both the title and the character – is always already enmeshed in the sympoiesis of superheroes.

## 7. The sympoiesis of superheroes

Even if the apotheosis of Miracleman and the concomitant consecration of the superhero genre seem to partly support Geoff Klock's argument that revisionist superhero comics mark "the transition of the superhero from fantasy to literature"<sup>513</sup>, it is nevertheless important to stress that rather than merely comports to a literary notion of intertextuality, where configurative textuality takes the form of Harold Bloom's poetic misprision, the media ecological aesthetics of superhero comics can be taken as an argument to reconfigure the hermeneutical concept of literature.<sup>514</sup> The participatory aesthetics of superhero comics is not so much a new phase in the evolution of the genre; rather, it is, as has been pointed out repeatedly, part of the cultural and material history of superhero comics, albeit arguably stressed by so-called revisionary comics. Accordingly, *Miracleman* maps influence, but not only in the teleological and metaphysical and humanist version of Harold Bloom's theories of anxiety and misprision; instead, it also indicates how the media system of American superhero comics affects and is affected by the emergence of distributed subjectivities, taking into account the involvement of non-human agencies.

Both the entangled and distributed agencies of the production history of *Miracleman* sketched earlier and the participatory aesthetics of the actual comic book published by Eclipse (and later Marvel, and before that Quality Comics) are con-

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<sup>513</sup> Klock, 2002, p 26

<sup>514</sup> While Bloom's theory of influence is clearly partly attuned to an operationally ajar function of structural coupling – not least apparent in how the theory prefigures William Blake's ecological model of ontogenesis as an ideal form of influence – Bloom's hermeneutical notion of subjectivity, meaning and interpretation ultimately grounds his theory in the liberal, humanist ideology the present argument seeks to reconfigure. See Harold Bloom, "Clinamen or Poetic Misprision", *New Literary History*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1972), p 381



nected to the way superhero comics function as a media system, organized by the operationally ajar closure of sympoiesis. Here, the explicit configurative textuality of *Miracleman* and of the revisionary titles of the metacomics of the 1980s and 1990s not only establishes a new phase in the history of superhero comics – opening up a new segment in the market – but also brings to the fore how structural coupling and configuration have been operative in the system from the very beginning. While Kidder’s notion of superhero analogues to some degree argues a relation of potential structural coupling across the whole system of superhero comics – a general arthrology operative across the media ecology of superheroes – some couplings are nevertheless more pertinent than others; and *Miracleman*, both its narrative and its history of production, clearly argues a strong relation to *Captain Marvel*. Concluding this chapter, a brief mapping of this relation will elucidate the participatory character of the superhero genre, which – as Derrida’s discussion on participatory genres indicated – is one of the main reasons for treating media systems as ecological systems. Accordingly, the participatory aesthetics of *Miracleman* permeates, often by direct and ostensive influence, the media system of the American comic book superhero. This could in fact very well be the real cultural significance of the many marvels of *Miracleman*.

## Captain Marvel

Marvel Comics acquired the rights to Mick Anglo’s *Marvelman* in 2009 and to *Miracleman* in 2012, publishing several collections with reprints of Anglo’s material before initiating the reissue of *Miracleman* in 2014. However, prior to this, Marvel Comics had been carrying a *Captain Marvel* title of their own for more than forty years (Figure 61), the 1967 *Captain Marvel* by Stan Lee and Gene Colan, premiered in *Marvel Super-Heroes* #12 (December, 1967).

Figure 61: Stan Lee, Gene Colan, *Marvel Super-Heroes* #12 (Marvel Comics, 1967)



With no overt connection to the Fawcett title, which had ceased its publication in 1953, the Marvel Comics *Captain Marvel* – soon published under its own title, although with moderate success – centers around Captain Mar-Vell, a representative of the alien intergalactic empire Kree, initially sent to Earth as a spy and military operative who eventually becomes a champion of his new adopted planet. *Captain Marvel* focuses on a science fictional atmosphere, where alien and supernatural technology is the basis of the hero’s powers, as well as for most plotlines. The title has



undergone several reboots, and although the character has not figured prominently within the Marvel Universe, a spin-off to the title, *Ms. Marvel* has been a staple character since its introduction in 1977, often as a member of the Marvel superhero group The Avengers. The eponymous hero of *Ms. Marvel* is the former airforce officer Carole Danvers, a supporting role in the 1967 *Captain Marvel*, who had her DNA merge with the alien DNA of Mar-Vell, after – what was thought to be – a fatal explosion that ended her involvement in the original title. In the latest reboot of *Captain Marvel*, launched by Marvel Comics in 2012, Carol Danvers takes up the role of Captain Marvel in what could be described as a feminist reconfiguration of the title. After Carole Danvers assumed the *Captain Marvel* title, the *Ms. Marvel* title was subsequently rebooted to feature the teenager Khamala Khan as Marvel Comics first Muslim lead character. Both the *Ms. Marvel* and the *Captain Marvel* 2010s reboots tap in to a self-referential and ironic style of narration, emphasizing the configurative textuality of metacomics. While these two reboots certainly seem to relate most overtly to the aesthetic mode employed in *Miracleman*, the first reboot of *Captain Marvel*, in 1970, brings the title close to one of the central tenets of Fawcett's *Captain Marvel*, the conjoined double identities, and in fact double bodies, of superhero and human. In this rebooted storyline, Captain Marvel is trapped in a parallel dimension from which he can only temporarily escape, when the young musician and wannabe-superhero sidekick Rick Jones switches places with him by means of alien and mysterious technology. The 1970s reboot of *Captain Marvel* explicitly becomes an analogue of the 1940 *Captain Marvel*, elaborating the tension between a human and a superhuman counterpart.

## Captain Britain

At approximately the same time as *Marvelman* was revived in *Warrior*, Alan Moore had started writing *Captain Britain* for Marvel UK, a title originally created by American comic book writer Chris Claremont in 1976 and specifically aimed at the British market. The character of Captain Britain is highly derivative, drawing on existing tropes, particularly those established by Marvel's character Captain America. However, rather than emerging as a genetically engineered superhuman, like Captain America, Captain Britain connects – from the perspective of Marvel US – to the perceived primordial history of Great Britain.<sup>515</sup> The backstory of Captain Britain contrasts scientific modernity with mythology: Brian Braddock is an upper-class physics student at Thames University, who, when the nuclear research facility he is

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<sup>515</sup> “Marvel U.K. created Captain Britain with Captain America explicitly as a model, so differences between Captain America and Captain Britain can be seen as intentional expressions of perceived national differences,” Jason Dittmer, “Captain Britain and the Narration of Nation”, in *Geographical Review*, Vol. 101, Issue 1, January 2011, p 76

working at is attacked, is forced to flee, head over heels, into the countryside, where he crashes his motorcycle in a circle of stones on the moors. In a dream vision he meets the wizard Merlin, who appoints Braddock guardian of Britain. Subsequently, as Captain Britain, Braddock is afforded a number of paranormal abilities, mainly derived from a number of magical artifacts given to him by Merlin. The character obviously emerges as an analogue of *Captain America*, with strong ties to the Fawcett *Captain Marvel* back-story, a mythological version of Marvel Comics 1967 science fictional *Captain Marvel*. The initial storylines sees Captain Britain as a run-of-the-mill superhero, battling against a series of super villains, mainly within a science-fictional setting. The moral ambiguities of scientific modernity are highlighted, “illustrating the ambivalence of science as a tool in modern society especially in the hands of people more concerned with their own desires than those of society.”<sup>516</sup> However, the magical and primordial origins of Captain Britain are successively supplemented by a more scientific rationale, largely as a direct response to reader reception.<sup>517</sup> Claremont left *Captain Britain* after ten issues, and the title ran intermittently in a number of different Marvel UK publications for a couple of years before seeing its first overall reboot in 1979, under writer Steve Parkhouse, artist Paul Neary and editor Dez Skinn. This reboot took Captain Britain back to a mythological setting, having him, together with Merlin and The Black Knight – an American superhero character with strong ties to Arthurian mythology – travel the fantasy realm of The Otherworld, defending Camelot against the evil lord Necronom. The Otherworld reboot of Captain Britain draws heavily on Arthurian legend as well as on the emerging fantasy genre, borrowing widely from Tolkien and the iconography of contemporary fantasy art and role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*. The storyline ran in Marvel UK’s *Hulk* and *Hulk Weekly* from December 1979 to May 1980. The next time *Captain Britain* appears is in *Marvel Super-Heroes* # 377 (September 1981), now written by David Thorpe, with art by Alan Davis. Ending the high fantasy storyline of Camelot, Captain Britain is brought back to earth. However, it soon becomes clear that it is a different earth from the one he is acquainted with. This earth, Earth-238 in the Marvel multiverse, is under fascist rule, policed by a powerful government agency called the Status Crew. After a series of bizarre adventures, Captain Britain uncovers a plot to enhance the evolutionary status of the whole continuum, set in motion by an extra dimensional agent called Saturnine, at the behest of the Dimen-

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<sup>516</sup> Ibid., p 79

<sup>517</sup> “Thus, a hero that began as a largely American understanding of British Identity – mystical, static – could be adapted to some of the discourses of British nationalism that were fed back to the production team via letters to the editor (especially discourses of scientific modernity). Of, course, because national discourses are multiple and often contradictory, Captain Britain could not emerge to represent at singular national identity held by British consumers.” Ibid., p 85



Figure 62: Left: *Marvel Super-Heroes* #388 (198), Middle and right: *Daredevils* #7 (1983), reproduced in *Captain Britain: The Siege of Camelot* (Marvel Comics, Panini Publishing, 2010)

sional Development Court. The two join forces in this naively benevolent but highly imperialistic project to refine humanity but are finally stopped by the super villain Mad Jim Jaspers, whose reality-altering abilities are apparently the source of the disequilibrium of Earth-238.

Alan Moore took over writing *Captain Britain* from *Marvel Super-Heroes* #387 (July, 1982). Moore and Davis swiftly terminated the Earth-238 storyline. Finally discovering that on Earth-238, superheroes had been persecuted and assassinated by the government under the secret guidance of Mad Jim Jaspers, Captain Britain himself is killed by Jasper's most feared weapon, a cybiote – “An unstoppable amalgam of flesh and metal”<sup>518</sup> – called The Fury. The storyline features the demise of alternate versions of British superhero characters, including a version of Marvelman and a hybrid version of Young Marvelman and Kid Marvelman (Figure 62). Interestingly, this is the first time Marvelman is referred to as Miracleman, when Captain Britain stumbles upon a graveyard populated by tombstones of dead superheroes, one of which bears the inscription “Miracleman” (Figure 62). “We came up with a parallel for all of our favorite British comics character”, Alan Moore reveals in an interview with George Khoury, and continues, “That’s obviously where I first thought of the name Miracleman as a variant on Marvelman. So when we needed a title for the American version, then sort of, I either had forgotten that I’d already used that name in ‘Captain Britain’, or I remembered but didn’t care. I can’t remember which, unfortunately.”<sup>519</sup>

<sup>518</sup> Alan Moore, Alan Davis, *Captain Britain Vol 4: The Siege of Camelot* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2010), p 128

<sup>519</sup> Khoury, 2001, p 18. Moore, who later for a long time opposed renaming Marvelman for the American market, a reluctance that supposedly contributed to the delay of the Pacific Comics publication of the title, published an

Within Alan Moore's storyline Captain Britain was subsequently revived – literally cloned from the remains of his body in Merlin's otherworldly laboratory – and the title was picked up as one of the main titles, together with Frank Miller's groundbreaking run on *Daredevil*, in Marvel UK's new comic book *The Daredevils*, premiered in January 1983.<sup>520</sup> Alan Moore and Alan Davis' stint on *Captain Britain*, published and produced at approximately the same time as *Marvelman*, evinces a clear sensibility of the metanarrative aspects of superhero multiverses and the deconstructive logics of the reboot. Many of the motifs and themes played upon in *Marvelman/Miracleman* – themes and motifs that later became staple in revisionary superhero comics – are salient in their version of Captain Britain.

## Shazam!

Twenty years after Fawcett cancelled their publication of *Captain Marvel*, DC Comics re-launched the character; however, since Marvel Comics, through their ongoing title *Captain Marvel* could claim trademark, DC published their version under the title *Shazam*. The launch of *Shazam* in 1973 (Figure 63), which saw a brief return of the original artist C. C. Beck for new material but which also reissued material from the Fawcett print runs, partly in answer to growing public interest in the history of the genre, coincided with the launch of the TV series *Shazam*.<sup>521</sup> *Shazam* folded as a stand-alone title in 1977, but the character has been figuring on and off in different cross-title events since its introduction into the DC universe, and several short-lived attempts at rebooting the title have been made. From a small part in the convoluted plotline of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985), the first attempt at rewriting the conflicting continuities of the DC multiverses, Captain Marvel is central to the plot in the prestige, standalone, graphic novel *Kingdom Come* (1996) by Mark Waid and Alex Ross. Discussed by Geoff Klock as one of the first revisionary superhero comics to deconstruct the human/superhuman binary, thus applying a realistic and what Klock interprets as a literary stance to the superhero, *Kingdom Come* enacts a memory process in which the reader participates and where the production of false memories utilizes the history of the title and character of Captain Marvel, much like the dream-machines of Dr. Gargunza (Figure 63).

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essay in the second issue of Eclipse's *Miracleman*, stating that although "for all practical intents and purposes, the character that you read about in these pages is called *Miracleman* [...] he isn't *really* called *Miracleman* at all." Alan Moore, *Miracleman* #2 (Eclipse, 1985)

<sup>520</sup> The transformation of Marvel's character *Daredevil* in the early 1980s is one of the earliest examples of a revisionary reboot of an established continuum. Geoff Klock writes: "Frank Miller broke into comic books on this title in the late 1970s, first as a penciler, then taking over as writer and transforming this poorly selling third-string superhero book into a compelling and realistic crime drama." Klock, 2002, p 18

<sup>521</sup> Gabilliet, 2010, p 78



Figure 63: Dennis O’Neil, C. C. Beck, “In The Beginning”, reprinted from *Shazam* #1 (DC Comics, 1973) in *Shazam: The Greatest stories ever told* (DC Comics, 2008); Mark Waid, Alex Ross, *Kingdome Come* (DC Comics, 1996); Judd Winick, Joshua Middleton, *Superman/Shazam: First Thunder* (DC Comics, 2005)

The relation between Superman and Captain Marvel is elaborated at some length in both *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and *Kingdome Come*, a relation that, given the production history of the two titles, inevitably also becomes a metafictional commentary. This relation is the center of the limited series *Superman/Shazam: First Thunder* (2004), where Superman, after teaming up with Captain Marvel against a common enemy, shares his experiences of the loneliness and alienation that comes with the secret identity and superhuman condition (Figure 63). Jeff Smith’s *Shazam: the Monster Society of Evil* (2007) activates the humoristic and whacky side of the Captain Marvel mythos, while drawing on the social exposure of the orphan Billy Batson living in unsupervised conditions and fending for himself as a house squatter. Smith’s limited series retells the origin story of Captain Marvel, strongly emphasizing the tension and conflict between human child and superhuman adult, while bringing back and reconfiguring some of the series iconic characters (Figure 64). A 2012 reboot of *Shazam* by Geoff Johns and Gary Frank, set within DC Comics general overhaul of their multiverses, *The New 52*, sees a decidedly darker configuration of Captain Marvel. Here, Billy Batson is presented as a tough, street smart and wisecracking youth whose experience of foster care and social services has left him equally cynical and self-providing (Figure 64). The backstory of Captain Marvel is elaborated as both a cultural and a social environment, as well as a fantastical and mythical Manichean epic, clearly contrasting a (social) realistic mode with a fantastic one. Johns and Frank’s rebooted Captain Marvel resurfaced in the cross-titles event *Justice League Trinity War* (2013), where the dark aspects of the Captain Mar-



vel and the Dark Adam character, the evil counterpart of Captain Marvel, and the magical conflict underpinning the Captain Marvel-mythos play an important part in yet another reconfiguration of the DC Universe (Figure 64).



Figure 64: Jeff Smith, *Shazam! The Monster Society of Evil* (DC Comics, 2007); Geoff Johns, Gary Frank, *Shazam!* (DC Comics, 2012); *Justice League: Trinity War* (DC Comics, 2013)

Grant Morrison’s cross-titles event *Final Crisis* (2008) places Captain Marvel in a narrative that explicitly thematizes the ontogenesis of configurative textuality. Bringing together a vast number of characters and events from the parallel storylines of the DC Universe, *Final Crisis* grafts in an immensely dense apocalypse, where the threat to creation and creativity in the end comes from the totality of a narrative where all is revealed and time and meaning are fulfilled. Instead, it is precisely the possibility to travel between universes, and in essence the heterogeneity of configurative textuality, that is presented as the key to the survival of the universe, where the interstitial spaces function as an ontogenetic infrastructure known as “the Bleed”, corresponding to the environment from which the multiverse emerges. Here, the braiding of general arthrology and the spatio-topology of the restrained arthrology of the comic book spread evidently become a material representation of “the Bleed” (Figure 65). Traversing the Bleed in a inter-dimensional spaceship, across different domains and orders of distinction, Captain Marvel and Superman, together with a handful of other Superman-analogues, set out to harness the power of its magical substance, although as environment and infrastructure it “cannot be touched, held or bottled”<sup>522</sup>. As is often the case with Grant Morrison’s superhero comics, the

<sup>522</sup> Grant Morrison, *Final Crisis* (New York: DC Comics, 2009), np



narrative repeatedly turns in on itself, in self-referring, recursive loops, like when Captain Marvel and Superman encounter “a book with an infinite amount of pages, all occupying the same space” of such immense density that even with their combined strength they have difficulties moving it (Figure 65). Structurally coupled story worlds, the passage emerges as a hypericon of the sympoiesis of superheroes.



Figure 65: Grant Morrison, *Final Crisis* (DC Comics, 2009); The Bleed (left and middle), The infinite book (right)

### The Original Writer: literature and comic books

Tracing the transformations of *Miracleman*, from the *Warrior* reboot of Mick Anglo’s *Marvelman* to Marvel Comics’ most recent reissues, across titles preceding *Miracleman*, titles such as *Ms. Marvel* and *Shazam* or the two *Captain Marvel*, indicates a network of influences where media systems affect and are affected by each other, across different domains and different levels of distinction. This is the media ecology of *Miracleman*, and by the brief mapping of influences in the previous section, it is argued that this is also the media ecology of American superhero comics. While the narrative segments of *Miracleman* discussed in this chapter engage in the sympoiesis of a participatory aesthetics, opening up the braiding of Thierry Groensteen’s general arthrology, it has also been argued that the operation of braiding, by the operationally ajar closure of configuration, applies not merely to the structuring of a title or a series but in extension to that of the media ecology as well. This is how the genre of superhero comics comes to function as a media system and as an ecosystem.

One important lesson that the media ecology of *Miracleman* brings to the present argument – the secret of *Miracleman*, perhaps – is that the ecological sympoiesis

of the reboot is as much a commercial process as it is an aesthetic one. To this end, the ontogenesis of the perception-event is as much about creativity as it is about commodification. It could thus be argued that *Miracleman* and superhero comics in general encapsulate both the pastiche character of reified art, which Fredric Jameson famously ascribed to the postmodern condition, and the polysemy and heterogeneity that Brian McHale sees as a critical and creative potential within the same.<sup>523</sup> This is also the challenge that superhero comics poses to literary theory. While academic and critical attention to comics in general, and to superhero comics in particular, has been on the rise over the last few decades, it is mainly the latter aspect of a post-modernist aesthetics that has been emphasized. Accordingly, Geoff Klock applies a literary – and, as has been pointed out, a liberal humanist – conception of influence and intertextuality to superhero comics, while narrative theory and to some extent also Groensteen’s semiotics highlight braiding and complex narrative structures as an expression of semantic complexity. Thus the material heterogeneity of the comic book form is interpreted as an expression of semantic ambiguity, or as the polysemy of a hybrid form. To this extent, Charles Hatfield argues that although comics as a cultural form are intrinsically tied to their production technologies – as has been indicated in this chapter – the study of comics, if it wants to assess the extent to which comics affect the reader, needs to treat the participatory aesthetics of comics as a hermeneutical form of expression.<sup>524</sup> The configurative textuality of comics becomes a mode of interpretation, according to a postmodernist model for the literary. This move, from literary criticism, risks becoming, like that of *Miracleman*’s at “Olympus”, an attempt at an ultimate, in-finite, archontic configuration, where the comic book series means rather than does something to its reader and environment. However, as has been noted earlier, such a move, though perhaps necessary from a hermeneutical perspective, will always be open – if only by the smallest remainder – to yet another configuration.

The world of *Miracleman* emerges in an ecology involving a large number of intersecting media systems. This emergence plays out, as has hitherto been argued, on different levels of cultural complexity; it is a matter of production technologies and media affordances, of intersecting historical circumstances, of converging and conflicting juridical systems, of different language areas, of geographical locations, of merging artistic and literary traditions. To varying degrees different agencies inter-

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<sup>523</sup> Annalisa Di Liddo makes precisely this point in her assessment of Alan Moore’s intertextual play with the history of comics and its relation to the history of literature: “I would argue that Moore’s intertextuality is less definable as pastiche than as Bakhtinian heteroglossia (or plurivocality) and dialogism, or even as historiographic metafiction.” Annalisa Di Liddo, *Alan Moore, Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), p 62

<sup>524</sup> Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics, an Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), p 65ff

vene in the actual reading process, presenting creativity as collective and ecological, and world-making as a matter of sympoiesis, of becoming-with, as Haraway would say. Furthermore, these processes are charged with a political and ethical dimension. The patricidal creativity advocated by Dr. Gargunza corresponds to the elevated position of Miracleman on the closing pages of *Miracleman #16*. Clearly this is an ethically problematic position, authoritative and imposing, insisting on a single interpretation of reality. It is originality as tyranny, in a world where Miracleman no longer belongs to the world – is no longer part of and subject to structural coupling – but functions merely as organizing structure. Nevertheless, even atop Olympus at the end of time, in the in-finite of the concluded narrative, the trace of configuration lingers on. Miracleman’s ceremonial costume, donned in the concluding pages of the last issue of “Olympus”, is a concrete reminder – a remainder – of the costume used by the original Fawcett *Captain Marvel* in the 1940s series (Figure 66). Reminding the reader, of course, by his very presence on the balcony above the world, that there are no originals in an ecosystem of structural coupling.

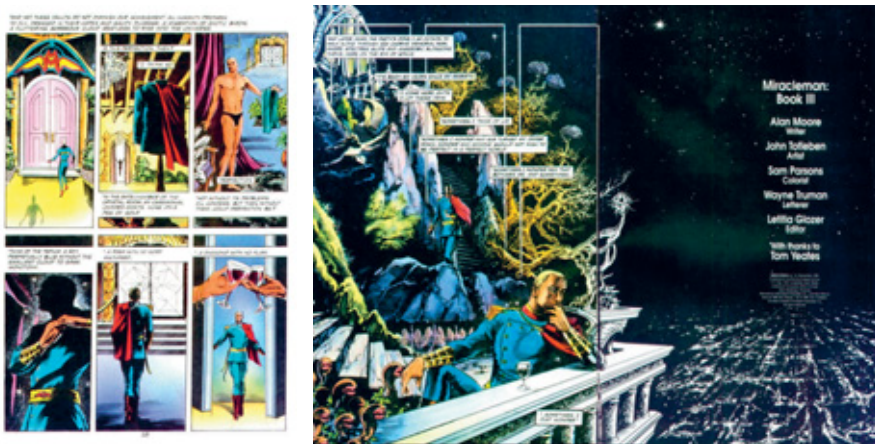


Figure 66: *Miracleman #16* (Eclipse Comics, 1989)

It could be argued that Miracleman’s position as an autonomous author of creation corresponds to the modern, liberal humanist function of authorial creativity, the authorial function as described by Foucault. This mirrors the evolution of the comic book industry, where critical and cultural concepts from the hermeneutical study of literature and art have been applied with increasing regularity, following the commercial and critical success of a number of comic book titles in the 1980s, most notably Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986) Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), and Dave Gibbons and Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* (1986). The emergence and adaptation by both industry and criticism of the graphic novel as a concept is a clear

testament to this evolution. The comic book creator now also becomes author, and thus paradoxically also a marketing category, a brand name to be used by the comic book industry alongside its other reified commodities.

Thus “Olympus” not only marks the end of history for *Miracleman* but it also represents the creative stagnation of superhero comics. From this point on, comics have become literature, effectively ceasing to be a participatory media system. The only alternative is to reboot. It is telling, or perhaps it is ironic, that Marvel Comics latest reboot of *Miracleman* has been prevented from mentioning Alan Moore as author – by Moore himself. It is from this clear aversion to reification, while at the same time elaborating the participatory aspects of the cultural commodity, from the “awareness of a split between self-image and its commodified dissemination” that Roger Whitson can argue that Alan Moore, together with William Blake, who is the focus of the next chapter, stands “on a precarious precipice in the globalizing capitalist world.”<sup>525</sup> The Marvel Comics printing of the first three books of *Miracleman* are thus simply attributed to “The Original Writer” (Figure 67). Evidently the originality of *Miracleman* is not a matter of patricide and subsequent apotheosis of the authorial position. Rather, its secret lies in the commodified fantasy of communal creativity.

Figure 67: title page, *Miracleman*  
“Book Three: Olympus” (Marvel Comics, 2015)



<sup>525</sup> Roger Whitson, “Panelling Parallax: The Fearful Symmetry of William Blake and Alan Moore”, in *Imagetext*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Winter 2007)

## Chapter 4:

# William Blake and the Six Chambers of Hell

The schematic, allegorical surface of Blake's prophetic books can mislead the moral imagination of the unwary reader. We are conditioned to read allegory as a parade of moral virtues and vices thinly disguised with human or natural imagery, and we tend to associate moral complexity with the 'thickness' of the mimetic disguise.

W. J. T. Mitchell, *Blake's Composite Art*, p 117

### 1. New Frontiers: The Godhead at Rockefeller Center



Figure 68: Left: Lee Lawrie, *Wisdom*, (1933); Right: William Blake, *Europe, a Prophecy*, Object 1, Copy G (1795)

The monumental relief above the main entrance to the GE Building (formerly the RCA Building) at Rockefeller Center in New York City is an adaptation of the first plate of William Blake's illuminated book *Europe, a Prophecy* from 1795 (Figure 68).



Constructed over a period of ten years, spanning from the depths of the Depression in 1930 to the tensions and anxieties of brooding European war in 1939, the fifteen interconnected buildings at Rockefeller Center occupy a salient position in the imaginary landscape of modernity. With constructions initiated shortly before Roosevelt's New Deal, Rockefeller Center is explicitly planned as an homage to modern, democratic Man, directing – in one monumental relay structure – the flows of modernity: culture, commerce and communication. It combines locales for business and public areas of leisure with the subterranean transportation network of the New York City Subway, with the subway station leading into the commercial areas of the shopping mall. It also housed the technological apparatus of the emerging media of radio and television, functioning from its very inauguration as a transmitter and relay of radio waves. Thus Rockefeller Center stands out as an exemplary site of intersecting media systems: a media-archeological Karnak of modernity. In the following, mapping the intersecting media systems of this specific site will elaborate some of the tensions that the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic has delineated within the modern, liberal humanist notion of art and literature. The basis for the argument is that the adaptation of William Blake's image at Rockefeller Center indicates a structural coupling between the media system of Rockefeller Center and that of William Blake, and that this structural coupling entails treating both as part of an ecology, which in the following will be designated as the media ecology of William Blake. As indicated by Marshall McLuhan's remark about Blake and the Romantics, referred to in Chapter 1 of this thesis, Blake is at the heart of the tension within the modern system of literature that a media-ecological approach seeks to investigate, the tension between a literary vision that is collective and mythic and the individualistic forms of literary expression. It is a tension, notes McLuhan, that also applies to the tension between creativity and commodification touched on in the previous chapter: "The vision will be tribal and collective, the expression private and marketable."<sup>526</sup> In the mapping of the media ecology of William Blake situated at Rockefeller Center, the relation between the ontogenesis of the fantastic and the cultural concepts of Western modernity will be a central theme.

The public art and decorations at Rockefeller Center were conceived of as offering spiritual relief at a time of crisis as well as serving a distinct educational function, enlightening and guiding the masses of the modern city. In a letter to the artists involved in the decorations, the "Rockefeller Group" under its President Nelson A Rockefeller outlined the intentions of the decorations:

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<sup>526</sup> McLuhan, 2011 (1962), p 304



They should not be ‘illustrations’. The philosophical or spiritual quality should dominate. We want a vision suggested. We want the paintings to make people pause and think and to turn their minds inward and upward. We are not interested in having these paintings retail facts or events, but rather, we hope, they may stimulate material but above all spiritual awakening. Our theme is: ‘NEW FRONTIERS.’<sup>527</sup>

Most of the art at Rockefeller Center falls within an art deco-register; two dominating approaches to the theme of “new frontiers” can be discerned: on the one hand, depictions of different forms of human labor – industrial workers, farm workers, construction workers – literally in the process of constructing new, visionary lands; on the other hand, motifs from classic mythology, affiliated with the theme of new frontiers, where the two large sculptures *Prometheus* and *Atlas*, by Paul Manship and Lee Lawrie, are particularly prominent.

Lawrie, who executed the relief above the main entrance known as “Wisdom”, a title derived from Isaiah 33:6 of the King James version attached to the figure, also made two additional adaptations of motifs from Blake’s illuminated books, mounted on each side of the center piece (Figure 69). These two reliefs – “Sound” and “Vision” – represent the media of radio and television (although television at the time was still largely a theoretical medium) to be broadcast from the RCA Building. “Sound” adapts an image from Blake’s *First Book of Urizen*, depicting the poet-artist character of Los retching in agony, suffering torture at the hands of Urizen (Figure 70), while the exact origin of the motif of “Vision” is not as clear, citing a gesture that is recurrent in Blake’s figures, particularly those that seem to be flying.<sup>528</sup>

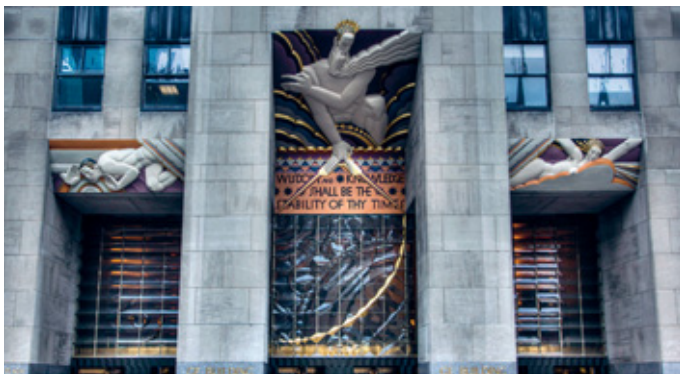


Figure 69: Lee Lawrie, *Sound, Wisdom, Vision*, (1933)

<sup>527</sup> Letter dated 30 September, 1932, in exhibition at MoMA, Spring 2012.

<sup>528</sup> Likely inspiration could have been: the *Songs of Innocence*, frontispiece; *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plate 3, 14; *Visions of The Daughters of Albion*, Plate 11; *Book of Ahania*, Plate 2; *Milton*, Plate 8; *Jerusalem*, Plate 11.

Figure 70: William Blake, *The First Book of Urizen*, Copy B, Object 8 (1795)

The compass extending from the hands of the patriarchal figure in “Wisdom” stresses the sensorial division indicated by the two adjacent reliefs. It is a division, however, that, like other divisions of modern epistemology corresponding to the notion of a strict distinction between subject and object, is contested by Blake’s aesthetics. Two of the central characters in Blake’s mythical universe, Urizen and Los, occupy important functions in Blake’s reconfiguration of the epic tradition of Western cultural history. Urizen functions as the great liberator from oppression who eventually becomes a tyrant of law and rationality, while Los is an embodiment of poetic freedom and creativity – for the most part, that is. When examining Blake’s mythology, it soon becomes clear that, while the structures and the characters and events of his epics seem to a large degree to be modeled on and to imitate schemes from canonical texts – in the case of *The First Book of Urizen* particularly *Genesis* and *Paradise Lost* – they are, as W. J. T. Mitchell points out “continually subverted and dislocated by the local textures of the poem.”<sup>529</sup> Likewise, the moral values and positions of the characters, as well as the characters themselves are continuously reconfigured within Blake’s work: “Characters are parts of one another, capable of becoming one another, or at least metaphors for one another. They are capable of change, conversion, degeneration, transformation, mutual absorption or repulsion, and indefinite subdivision and differentiation.”<sup>530</sup> Accordingly, the following chapter will argue that the adaptation of motifs from Blake’s iconography and mythology, and perhaps particularly of the highly elusive and ambiguous figure of Urizen, the character depicted in the first plate of *Europe, a Prophecy*, imbues the monumentality of the father figure of the godhead with an ecological remainder, marking the monument as a site for configuration, rather than as a structure for merely implementing the educational and enlightening intentions of the “Rockefeller Group”.



<sup>529</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *Blake's Composite Art: a study of the illuminated poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p 124

<sup>530</sup> *ibid.*, p 118

The compass affirming the division of the senses and the stabilizing epistemology of the modern era is a loaded image in Blake’s iconography, representing an enlightenment rationality and a neo-classicist sensuality that is explicitly opposed and problematized by Blake’s aesthetics. Blake’s well-known design *Newton* (Figure 71) makes the connection between enlightenment philosophy and the compass explicit, further stressing the relation to Newtonian optics.



Figure 71: William Blake, *Newton*, print date 1795

However, as is evident from *Newton* – this version printed and colored in 1795 – the division of the senses and the corresponding cognitive faculties forming the basis for enlightenment epistemology is not as clear as it first might seem. While the compass and the line of vision of the figure seem to indicate an ordered universe of classical proportions, transferable into

the material medium on which the compass is poised, the environment surrounding the figure refutes such a division. Mitchell notes that this tension in the image, between the intruding environment and the geometrical forms of the figures – the body of Newton concentrated around itself as in a circle – corresponds to a dialectic between outline and color in Blake’s art.<sup>531</sup> However, Blake’s is not a synthesizing dialectic; it is rather the manner in which the opposition – and Blake’s art is continuously engaging in, and breaking down, oppositions, as the often quoted line “Opposition is true Friendship” from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* seems to indicate – is dissolved and upheld by the medium of the illuminated book in an event of ecological sympoiesis.<sup>532</sup> Blake’s illuminated book takes the form of an object in distribution and assemblage, a system-environment-hybrid, a quasi-object. That is why, as this chapter will elucidate, Blake has posed such a difficult problem to a modern conception of culture and literature; his is an art whose materiality strongly opposes hermeneutics

<sup>531</sup> Ibid., p 51

<sup>532</sup> William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, revised edition, (ed.) David Erdman (New York: Anchor Books, 1982 (1965)), p 42. References to Blake’s poetry and prose will be made in the text, using Erdman’s edition. However, if a particular copy of an illuminated book is referred to, this will be indicated. Likewise, if the plate number is relevant. The digitized copies of the online *William Blake Archive* are used throughout this chapter. The line “Opposition is true Friendship” is clearly visible only in the uncolored copy B but can be glimpsed through the colors of several copies. Here, the compare option at the digital archive gives here an excellent overview of the material.

and formal categorizations. To this extent, the absence of printed and set versions of Blake's poetry published during his lifetime has strongly affected reception of Blake as a poet. With no ideal text to be referred to, editors of Blake's work were forced to configure their own versions of his poetry; the reception of Blake's poetry has led to a line of creative editors, from the Rossetti brothers to W. B. Yeats and up to the now standard edition of David Erdman published in 1965.<sup>533</sup> Producing a printed Blake, however, also had the effect of generating a hermeneutically dense – and what at times has been considered an incomprehensible – textual work out of a material that was never exclusively textual from the beginning. Essentially, editors of William Blake transform picture books into poetry. Thus the participatory reading of the illuminated book, operating as an embodied practice with the explicit purpose expressed by Blake on numerous occasions of producing the ontogenesis of a perception-event, has been transferred within the reception of Blake in the history of Western literature to a predominately hermeneutic participation, stressing epistemological ambiguity. To this extent, it could be argued that modern literary history has produced a textual Blake in which the embodied perception of his books – a perception that, much like the general arthrology of comic books, *performs* rather than *expresses* heterogeneity – becomes a hermeneutical enigma to which no apparent system of meaning-production applies. This has forced editors and critics to create their own epistemological frameworks in accordance with the motto of Los expressed in Blake's illuminated book *Jerusalem* (1804-1829): "I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans/I will not Reason or Compare: my business is to Create". What is at stake here is no less than faërian drama, where Blake grounds the creation of worlds in embodied participation and where the city of poetic imagination, Los's *Golgonooza*, emerges as an ecosystem in which the liberal humanist subject – in Blake's terminology the "Spectres" of "Selfhood" – is constantly haunted by the remainder of structural coupling.

In the following chapter, it will be argued that a neocybernetic understanding of operationally ajar closure will offer a framework for theorizing Blake's ideas of creating systems. This approach allows treating both an expressed and a performed heterogeneity in the work of Blake. A media ecological analysis of the aesthetics of Blake's illuminated book will then be applied to a number of structural couplings between media systems, where Blake's influence, as a sympoietic system, will inform the history and the aesthetics of the fantastic. However, this is by no means meant to be a comprehensive mapping of Blake's influence on Western cultural history; these structural couplings will merely indicate a small portion of the media ecology of William Blake. Roger Whitson and Jason Whittaker, whose study has already been mentioned as a strong influence on the present one, take a similar approach to the

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<sup>533</sup> Whitson and Whittaker, 2013, p 32-35

aesthetics of Blake. Mapping Blake's influence in adaptations, critical editions, fan-art and other creative responses to his work, they propose the concept of *zoamorphosis*, elaborating on the ancient Greek word "zoa", meaning "living one", used by Blake in his *The Four Zoas*, to describe its participatory ontogenesis. This argument largely follows theirs, but with the explicit intent of theorizing Blake's aesthetics within the media history of the fantastic.

In a sense, the argument in this chapter centers on Blake's notion of perception, whereby Blake, throughout his work, presents an organ of perception beyond the confines of the corporeal and sensual hierarchy of Enlightenment epistemology. Blake's ideal perception is the perception of poetic creation in which a cleansing of the "doors of perception" will allow access to the infinite state of things, as one of Blake's most famous lines, from the illuminated book *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790) informs. This entails the ontogenesis of a perception-event, in the form of a distribution of agencies. This is the fourfold vision that Blake contrasts the single vision of reasoning and comparing, which is the perception that according to Blake builds empires, eventually leading to the tyranny of the godhead. Single vision, corresponding to operational closure, as will be elaborated in the following, is opposed by poetic creation. However, being the inevitable outcome of the creation of a system, where configuration generates a distinct organization, single vision is also linked to fourfold vision, in the form of a recursive loop between system and environment. In Blake's mythical secondary world, identities are never stable and individuation can always threaten the environment with oppression; this is how a figure such as Urizen, depicted in the frontispiece of *Europe, a Prophecy* and adapted by Lawrie at Rockefeller Center, can be both a liberator and a tyrant. In fact, this is always the potential of an ecosystem, that it changes and undoes its environment – as one of the proverbs of Hell informs: "The cut worm forgives the plow." (E 35) This is part of the energy of creation, according to Blake, that it also destroys. A system dominated by single vision, however, ceases to be creative. In neocybernetic terms, it becomes a strictly autopoietic system, no longer open to structural coupling. In a letter to his one-time patron Tomas Butts, dated 22 November 1802, in a long verse amended to the letter at the behest, Blake informs him, of his wife Catherine, "I will bore you more with some Verses which My Wife desires me to Copy out & send you with her kind love & Respect" (E 721), Blake ascribes single vision to the rationalistic reasoning of Newton:

Now I a fourfold vision see  
And a fourfold vision is given to me  
Tis fourfold in my supreme delight  
And three fold in soft Beulahs night

And twofold Always. May God us keep  
From Single vision & Newtons sleep (E 722)

Blake engaged in contemporary debates on aestheticism, arguing in his manifesto-like *Descriptive Catalogue* of 1809 for an art of outline and form and against the art of light and color of the Flemish and Venetian masters. In Blake's view, this was represented in England most prominently, by Joshua Reynolds, but this opposition is not upheld in Blake's aesthetics; instead, the composite art of the illuminated book functions precisely by dissolving oppositions within the environment of the medium. W. J. T. Mitchell describes the perception of intersecting and intermingling sensorial agencies emerging from such an aesthetic event as synaesthetic ambiguity. Synaesthetic ambiguity is a central concept in Mitchell's understanding of Blake's composite art, akin in a sense to the ambiguous perception of the fantastic:

Blake avoids the objective, homogenous, visual rendering of pictorial space, then, not to produce a sense of other-worldly subjectivism, but to restore a tactile, synaesthetic quality to pictorial form. The continuity of figure and background is a literal emblem of multisensory contact between consciousness and the world. The pervasiveness of elemental forms is a stylistic strategy for providing this sort of contact for the viewer, emphasizing the nonvisual sensations of heat, cold, wetness, dryness, hardness, and softness rather than the sensory alienation of visual distance.<sup>534</sup>

Blake's composite art points to the mingled character of the sensorium. If the illuminated book and the perception it generates is an indication of how "all media are mixed media"<sup>535</sup>, this happens by first establishing the body as a distribution of sensorial agency. In this sense, synaesthetic ambiguity is a symptom of the sympoiesis of configurative aesthetics. Blake's notions of poetic imagination and of the illuminated book as an embodied generation of a new sensorial apparatus where perception is ontogenetic are what prompts McLuhan to situate Blake at the center of the tension between the collective and the individualistic, between the mythical and the personal in modern literature. McLuhan notes: "Imagination is that ratio among the perceptions and faculties which exists when they are not embedded or outered in material technologies. When so outered, each sense and faculty becomes a closed system. Prior to such outering there is entire interplay among experiences.

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<sup>534</sup> Mitchell, 1978, p 60

<sup>535</sup> Mitchell is talking here about media in reference to sensorial modalities and not media as material modes of production: "On closer inspection, all the so-called visual media turn out to involve the other senses (especially touch and hearing). All media are, from the standpoint of sensory modality, 'mixed media'". Mitchell, 2005b, p 257



This interplay or synesthesia is a kind of tactility such as Blake sought in the bounding line of sculptural form and in engraving.<sup>536</sup> Although working with archetypal forms and clear lines, Blake's mythical figures are never closed systems but are always, as McLuhan notes, attentive to the "simultaneous awareness of a complex group of causes and effects."<sup>537</sup> The creative imagination of Blake's poetic perception functions here as the system-environment hybrid of ecological sympoiesis.

In the 1795 version of *Newton*, the synaesthetic effects of the interplay between system and environment emerges most clearly in the seamless transformation of the background into the material on which the figure is inscribing. This impact of the environment on the lines and figures is perhaps even more emphasized in a version of the print from 1804-05, where the organic structure and coloring seem to indicate an underwater location (Figure 72). Here, however, the continuous flow of the rock into the writing surface is no longer present.



Figure 72: *Newton*, printed and colored c. 1804-1805

In the letter from the Rockefeller Group, visionary art is requested for the decorations at Rockefeller Center. But since suggesting a vision of another world entails creating an ontogenetic medium, the requested vision of "NEW FRONTIERS" necessitates the participation of the viewer. In the following, it will be argued that

the site-specific environment of Rockefeller Center becomes an extended sensorium, an apparatus of ambiguous perception in which the viewer participates; in short, Rockefeller Center becomes an ontogenetic medium. This however affects the explicit politics and intentions of the site. To this extent, the adaptation of William Blake's epic and prophetic poetry would seem particularly adequate. The adaptation of a morally ambiguous figure in the position of the benevolent father-god of Christianity, a connection that is further strengthened by Lawrie's relief incorporating the Biblical verse, could be seen not only as a critique of the Rockefeller family in a time of political and economical crisis; such a critique, and the position from which it is formulated, is also problematized by the participatory aesthetics of William Blake's work. Lawrie's incorporation of Blake's participatory aesthetics at Rockefeller Center,

<sup>536</sup> McLuhan, 2011, p 300

<sup>537</sup> *Ibid.*, p 300

at the site for an explicit invocation of contemporary culture and media as forms for ideological transmission, where the hierarchical structuring of the senses is implemented as the new media of radio and television, emphasizes the resistance to totalizing holism innate in an ecology of media. The medium of the fantastic retains, as the discussion of Levinasian ethics indicated earlier, a trace of an exterior, a remainder always already operative in the whole.

## **The Secret in the Wall 2: The Return of Lenin**

The most notable, and very much still operative, trace of exteriority in the media ecology of Rockefeller Center is the mural executed by Mexican artist Diego Rivera in the lobby of the RCA Building (Figure 73). Never on public display and hacked down in February 1934, after being covered for nine months under canvas, its presence still haunts Rockefeller Center. After failing to secure the services of Picasso and Matisse – who had been the artists preferred by the family patriarch John D Rockefeller Jr. – the choice of the centerpiece of the artistic decorations at the site, made by Abby Rockefeller in November 1932, fell on Rivera.<sup>538</sup> That Rivera was an active member of the Mexican Communist Party and was currently touring the Soviet Union did not pose a problem for the selection. Initially, The Rockefeller Group further clarified their intentions to Rivera: “To understand what we mean by ‘New Frontiers’, look back over the development of the United States as a nation”, declaring that the opportunity of “moving on” has been a prerequisite for the American way of life and that “the story of two centuries of American civilization can be told in its unfolding physical frontiers”. It is within the context of perpetual expansion, transferred – when the physical expanse of the continent has been traversed – to the mental and spiritual realm, that the art and decoration of Rockefeller Center are to be inserted: “The development of civilization is no longer lateral; it is inward and upward. It is the cultivation of man’s soul and mind, the broadening and deepening of his relations to his fellow men, the coming to a fuller comprehension of the meaning and mystery of life.”<sup>539</sup> Rivera’s design – “Man at the Crossroads”, a political and visionary allegory with strong science-fictional and futuristic imagery – met the intentions of the group. When it was discovered, late in the process, that Rivera had inserted images of known public and political figures in the mural – particularly the image of Lenin was problematic – Nelson D Rockefeller was provoked to petition Rivera to “substitute the face of some unknown man where Lenin’s face now appears”, noting that such a portrait “might very easily seriously offend a great many people.” Rivera did not remove Lenin and the commission was terminated.

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<sup>538</sup> Daniel Okrent, *Great Fortune, the epic of Rockefeller Center* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p 295f

<sup>539</sup> Letter on display at MoMa, April, 2012

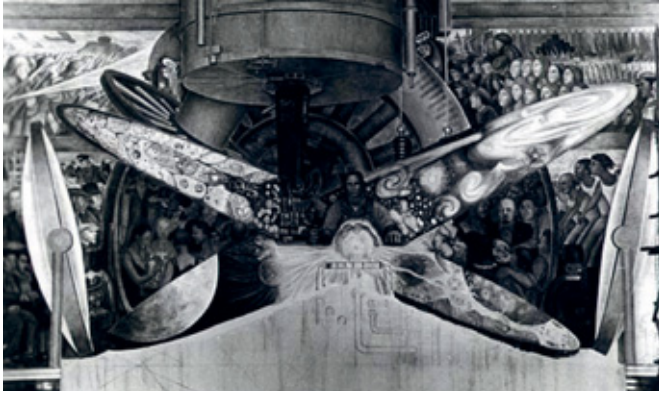


Figure 73, Diego Rivera, “Man at the Crossroads”, work in progress at Rockefeller Center, 1932-34

When visiting Rockefeller Center, the presence of Rivera’s removed mural is palpable. Since 1937 the site has been covered by the mural *American Progress*, by the Spanish artists José Maria Sert (Figure 94). Nevertheless, guide tours and official web pages, as well as onsite information, focus on the conflict between Rivera and the Rockefellers, and the ensuing destruction of his mural. In its physical absence “Man at the Crossroads” is one of the most influential agents in the distribution of agencies at work at Rockefeller Center, perpetually demarking, unintentionally perhaps, the fantastic realms of utopia.

### **The illuminated book**

The work of William Blake demands participation. In this sense, his art is a difficult art. Within Western modernity, the privileged, if not the only, mode for participation vis-à-vis cultural objects has been as an act of interpretation. The participatory aesthetics of the illuminated book has therefore generated, roughly, two distinct historical receptions. On the one hand, parts of Blake’s work – particularly the shorter poems of his earlier works, such as *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789, 1794) and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790) – have been deemed eminently ambiguous and multivalent from an epistemological and hermeneutic perspective. On the other hand, and from the same perspective, large parts of his work – the longer prophetic poems, but also the actual materiality of the illuminated book itself – have been considered superfluously meaningless, unintelligible and nonsensical. The historical reception of William Blake – while being attracted by his liminal position in the cultural landscape of Romanticism – has had considerable difficulty in accommodating the vibrant materiality of Blake’s illuminated book. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, print technologies could not reproduce Blake’s illuminated books. And when reproduction became technologically possible,

the costs of such endeavors were too high for mass production. Print versions of the illuminated books were accordingly generated, producing ideal texts conforming to print-oriented, modernist notions of literature. Such textual versions of Blake's illuminated books understandably did not consider the radically specific material character of each copy, explaining why the line "Opposition is true Friendship" referred to earlier in this section, could not only be considered a part of Plate 20 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* but also be made into a central tenet in Blake's cosmology, while not appearing in any of the colored copies of the book (Figure 74). The only instance where the line actually appears in a clear and legible state – since Blake did not leave any fair copies of his poems – is in the uncolored Copy B.



Figure 74: *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Copy B, 1790; *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Copy F, 1794

Questioning the mode of reproduction, Blake's illuminated book situates itself in between print and manuscript culture.<sup>540</sup> With the digitization of Blake's illuminated books – undertaken primarily by the William Blake Archive, starting in 1996 – access to some aspects of the materiality of the books has been greatly facilitated. It is now, for instance, possible to read reproductions of the books without paying the high price of the facsimile editions that have been available since the 1950s; and furthermore, it is possible to compare different copies – though in digital reproduction – without travelling between the different locations where Blake's books are kept.

Before describing how a media-ecological understanding of William Blake's composite art informs the present investigation into the medium of the fantastic, it is

<sup>540</sup> This is Mitchell's argument in the chapter "Visible Language", in Mitchell, 1994, p 111-150

necessary to briefly sketch the reception of William Blake in mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century literary criticism. The aesthetics of William Blake – and the problems it poses to a modernist aesthetics – is intricately intertwined with the modern definition of the fantastic as hermeneutical ambiguity.

### **Fearful symmetry: modernist systems of mythology**

For modernist and hermeneutical theories of literature, William Blake's poems, and particularly his longer, prophetic texts, are problematic mainly on two distinct levels. Firstly, they are mythological – they engage in mythopoiesis – without being grounded in any recognizable mythological tradition.<sup>541</sup> Secondly, many of Blake's epic poems – all except the long poem *The Four Zoas*, extant only in manuscript form – are intimately and intricately intertwined with the specific medium of Blake's illuminated book. Perhaps because it was not set as an illuminated book, *The Four Zoas* has become a guiding text – a mythopoietic manifesto of sorts – for the print-oriented ideology of modernist criticism. Being the most comprehensive textual exposition of Blake's mythology, *The Four Zoas* is often considered an origin text from which Blake later reconfigured his two illuminated epics *Milton* and *Jerusalem*.<sup>542</sup> The linguistic bias of modernist criticism seems to have further imbued the manuscript with originating properties. However, although *The Four Zoas* was never etched or engraved, the manuscript is highly illustrated, in addition to being in a state of revision (Figure 75).<sup>543</sup> While the textual status of the

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<sup>541</sup> T. S. Eliot famously views Blake's mythopoiesis as an inferior mythology; what is lacking, in Blake, says Eliot, is the profundity of tradition one finds in the Catholic, Mediterranean cultural hemisphere, where a genuine connection with the mythologies of the past is alive and well. Antiquity and paganism are here part of the cultural heritage, whereas the "trolls and pixies" of the British Isles have diminished to a "dwarfish state". Thus Blake constructs his epics out of inorganic and disparate materials. The result is likened, by Eliot, to "an ingenious piece of home-made furniture" adding: "we admire the man who has put it together out of the odds and ends from about the house." What is disturbing to Eliot, it seems, are the fantastic elements of Blake's poetry, when these are not correlated with a structuring principle, as that of the Catholic religion, or a rigorous philosophy (preferably grounded in Catholic religiosity). Eliot concludes: "About Blake's supernatural territories, as about the supposed ideas that dwell there, we cannot help commenting on a certain meanness of culture. They illustrate the crankiness, the eccentricities, which frequently affects writers outside of the Latin traditions, and which such a critic as Arnold should certainly have rebuked. And they are not essential to Blake's inspiration." T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1932), p 321)

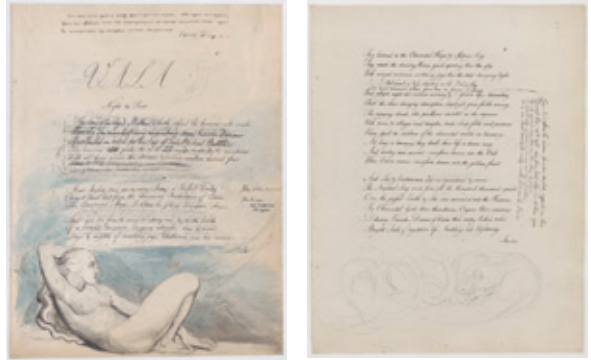
<sup>542</sup> This is how Frye discusses and handles the mythological material of *The Four Zoas*. Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A study of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969 (1947)), p 315. Mitchell seems to consider the *Four Zoas* as the moment when Blake's verbal art finally equals the inventiveness of his pictorial art and art of illumination. Mitchell, 1978, p 110

<sup>543</sup> For illuminating comments on the material state of the manuscript, see the William Blake Archive and *Blake Quarterly Blog*: <http://blog.blakearchive.org>



manuscript is commented on by Harold Bloom in David Erdman's standard edition *Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*, the illustrations and the page design are not discussed.

Figure 75: Manuscript, *The Four Zoas*, William Blake, 1797, Object 3 (left), Object 13 (right)



The basic problem for a modern and hermeneutical notion of literature is that William Blake's mythopoiesis cannot be derived from an existing mythological system, nor can it be separated from the me-

di-um in which it is expressed. Despite this condition and disregarding the material aspects of Blake's illuminated books, formalist and modernist literary criticism established, by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, an understanding of William Blake's aesthetics as a complex and epistemologically ambiguous system of philosophical principles, largely derived from a Judeo-Christian tradition. Rather than indicating how Blake's mythologies function as participatory texts and participatory genres – in the sense Derrida gives the term, as discussed earlier – prominent scholars such as Northrop Frye and Harold Bloom construct Blake's mythology as a structure of coherent meaning, seemingly in direct response to the metafictional statement made by the blacksmith and artisan Los in Blake's epic poem *Jerusalem*, cited earlier.<sup>544</sup> Arguing the visionary poet's perception as a source of poetic creation central to Blake's mythical, secondary world, and highlighting artistic creation as the emergence of a sensorium that breaches and transcends contraries, Frye – and to a lesser extent Bloom –

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<sup>544</sup> While acknowledging the illuminated book as an important medium in Blake's aesthetic theories, both Frye and Bloom explicitly focus on the print versions of Blake's poems. Bloom states in the preface to his study: "I have slighted Blake's illustrations to his engraved poems, though to do so is to go against Blake's intentions and against what is now the accepted view among Blake scholars. Blake's poems, especially his epics, seem to me the best poetry in English since Milton, but about Blake's illustrations my judgment is uncertain. Some of them seem to me very powerful, some do not; but I am in any case not qualified to criticize them. As a critic I have tried to be true to my own experience in reading and enjoying Blake for fifteen years, and my experience is that the poems are usually quite independent of their illustrations." Harold Bloom, *Blake's Apocalypse* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), p 9. Likewise Frye, while using the illuminated books as indication of a "canon" of Blake books, focuses on the print versions of his poetry. This does not prevent them both from once in a while interpreting the illustrations and designs of individual plates as significant to the overall meaning of a poem, without, however, conceptualizing the composite art of the illuminated book.



nevertheless locates this visionary perception in Blake's own creative process and not in the materiality of the book or in the act of reading. The hermeneutical response to Blake's poems is not, from a formalist and modernist critical standpoint, so much a question of creating a system of meaning, as re-creating a pre-existing system, in a transcendent relation to the material. The perception-event of embodied ontogenesis, explicitly thematized by Blake as central to his visionary mythology, is thus retained, as in Todorov's definition of the fantastic, within the formal categories of the literary work as a coherent – and autonomous – structure of meaning.

An approach to William Blake's illuminated books that merely focuses on textual meaning-production has its merits, and particularly so within a modernist framework. The historical contextualizations made by Frye and Bloom greatly enrich an understanding of Blake's artistic production as well as offer elucidating interpretations of the complex meaning structures of specific poems and books. And clearly both Frye and Bloom have contributed immensely to 20<sup>th</sup>-century literary criticism, partly as a result of their respective confrontations with the aesthetics of William Blake.<sup>545</sup> However, it is also clear that, by omitting the materiality of the illuminated book, a modernist and formalist critique fails to ascertain the extent to which the participatory aesthetics of William Blake also entails material participation in the form of media-ecological sympoiesis. Rather than exposing a mythic method in Blake's composite art, laying bare to the reader the poetic energies of Blake's creative perceptions, the systems imposed upon Blake's mythopoiesis by scholars such as Bloom and Frye – as frameworks for interpretation – lead to abstract reasoning and comparison.

## 2. Men in the Form of Books

A scholarly turn toward the materiality of Blake's illuminated books, coinciding with the emergence of a media-specific sensibility partly tied to the new materialism of digital humanities studies, has recently emphasized material participation as an integral part of the creative perception of Blake's visionary poetry. Jerome McGann's critique of the modernist notion of literature from a position of textual criticism has advocated a participatory aesthetics and criticism that move beyond the literary work as a coherent and autonomous – and essentially ahistorical – whole. In his book on Blake, McGann writes a motto of sorts that is equally valid for the present investigation:

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<sup>545</sup> Bloom's theories of poetic misprison are partly based on his reading of Blake, as discussed in "Clinamen or Poetic Misprison" (1972) and "The Internalization of Quest-Romance", in *Romanticism and Consciousness*, ed. Harold Bloom, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1970). Frye has repeatedly stated that his theories of literary genres presented in *Anatomy of Criticism* are a direct continuation on his work on Blake in *Fearful Symmetry*, see "The Road to Excess" (1963), and "The Keys to the Gates" (1966), both reprinted in *Romanticism and Consciousness*, ed. Harold Bloom, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1970)

Blake's work is important, in this study, because it insists that poetry is not just a play or dance of language. The illuminated text is an index and a symbol of this translinguistic condition – a condition in which imagination comes to be figured as a deed of art, a performance in the world. The extreme unreality of Blake's materials – I mean his notorious personal mythology – simply reinforces the arbitrary, agented character of what Blake produces. Reality is what it is made to be and poetic truth is not conceptual; it is a process of knowing.<sup>546</sup>

With the digitization of William Blake's illuminated books, particularly as initiated by the William Blake Archive in 1996, the medium specificity of the illuminated book has come further into focus.<sup>547</sup> N. Katherine Hayles' discussions of media-specific analysis and her notions of the distributed cognition related to the material environment of situated reading practices – in particular of such specific texts as Blake's illuminated books, called technotexts by Hayles, where the innate participatory aspects of reading are made explicit – have strongly influenced a new field of Blake studies. Pared with an affiliation with non-hermeneutical media studies, in particular media studies influenced by Friedrich Kittler's work, these studies pick up threads from two currents in the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century reception of Blake: on the one hand, the neo-philology of new historicism, in particular the studies of the already mentioned Jerome McGann; on the other hand semiotic intermedia studies, epitomized by W. J. T. Mitchell's groundbreaking study *Blake's Composite Art* (1978).

Within the media-oriented and non-hermeneutic field of Blake studies, a notion of literature can be discerned that accommodates the participatory aesthetics essential to the fantastic. Here, the mythical world of William Blake can finally be situated within its proper milieu, articulating the sympoiesis of the fantastic as a critique of hermeneutics and the modernist notion of literature and subjectivity. In the following, a short discussion on the digitization of William Blake's illuminated book *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* will show how a digital environment stresses a media-ecological understanding of William Blake's mythic method and of the aesthetics of the fantastic.

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<sup>546</sup> Jerome J. McGann, *Towards a Literature of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p 4

<sup>547</sup> N. Katherine Hayles discusses the digitization of the illuminated book, as well as the illuminated book itself, as an instance where the reader is reminded of the material aspects of literature, and that these always form a part of the situated experience of literature. This is why Hayles advocates a media-specific analysis (MSA) as the starting point for literary (and cultural) criticism: "MSA aims to electrify the neocortex of literary criticism into recognizing that strands traditionally emphasizing materiality (such as criticism on the illuminated manuscript, on writers such as William Blake and Emily Dickinson, where embodiment is everything and on the rich tradition of artists' books) are not exceptions but rather instances of MSA. Like all literature, technotexts has a body (or rather many bodies), and the rich connections between its material properties and its content create it as a literary work in the full sense of the term." Hayles, 2002, p 32

## Fantastic sympoiesis: the ecological aesthetics of William Blake

There is a place in Hell where “knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation” (E 40).<sup>548</sup> To be more precise, there is a place in William Blake’s illuminated book *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* where the voice of one of that book’s many protagonists, this particular one an infernal explorer and anthropologist of the netherworld, proclaims: “I was in a Printing house in Hell & saw the method in which knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation” (E 40). Framed by the proper fictionalization – “a memorable fancy” – the statement is pure fantasy. And as such, to be taken with utmost sincerity, for, if we the proverbs of Hell are to be believed (and why shouldn’t they), “What is now proved was once, only imagin’d” (E 36, Figure 76).

Figure 76: William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Copy H, Plate 8, printed 1790, colored 1821

The line on the printing house follows one of the most disseminated lines of the Blakean oeuvre: “If the doors of perception were cleansed, every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.” Such a cleansing is in turn achieved “by printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal” (E 39). Blake, who as printer and engraver had developed his own method of illuminated printing, etched the copper plates of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in 1790. Nine copies of the book are extant, executed over the course of almost thirty years, the last copy made in 1821.<sup>549</sup> After printing, each print was individually colored and illuminated by hand, in effect making every copy an original (Figure 77).



<sup>548</sup> Blake, William, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Copy H, Plate 15, printed 1790, recolored 1821, accessed via [blakearchive.org](http://blakearchive.org). References to Blake’s illuminated books will be given in the text. If not stated otherwise, the copy referred to is the digitally remediated copy H.

<sup>549</sup> The use *copy* is here in accordance with the editorial practice when dealing with Blake’s books. Copy indicates a version of a book, a version that is also an original. Joseph Viscomi argues that it is likely that Blake printed several copies in one printing, although waiting for commission of a particular copy before doing the finishing coloring. It is therefore difficult to attest the exact date of execution. Viscomi, Joseph, *The Idea of the Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p 112-118. However, it is established that the last copy of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Copy H, was finished and colored in 1821.



Figure 77: William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Copy H, Plate 14 and Plate 15, printed 1790, colored 1821

## Infernal printing

The exact details of Blake's method are unknown. However, Joseph Viscomi has established, in an impressive feat of reversed engineering, some basic outlines. Blake wrote and drew directly on the copper plates, using an acid-resistant varnish, which, behaving in a manner similar to ink, allows the free-flowing lines of his style.<sup>550</sup> After drawing, acid was applied, producing a workable plate. Few sketches and no fair copies of Blake's illuminated poems are extant.<sup>551</sup> And since his printings are "free of the visual distortion that characteristically occurs when one set of codes is translated onto another"<sup>552</sup>, it is likely that they were originally executed, invented and not copied, into the copper plates. This assumption is substantiated by Blake's repetition of a limited number of ready-made forms and designs, "a well-used repertoire of images that enabled him to draw/invent quickly but not incorrectly."<sup>553</sup> Originality is produced not by the individual treatment of a motif or a particular detail but by the ironical rendering of "traditional images and symbols."<sup>554</sup> It is a matter of innovatively reconfiguring cultural stereotypes. Materially, as well as thematically, the mythology of Blake's illuminated books is inscribed in a configurative aesthetics where the participation entailed generates a distributed – and often highly ambiguous –

<sup>550</sup> Ibid., p 53

<sup>551</sup> Ibid., p 30

<sup>552</sup> Ibid., p 31

<sup>553</sup> Ibid., p 28

<sup>554</sup> Ibid., p 34

perception. The construction of a new form of perception is, as has already been mentioned, integral to the visionary ideals of Blake's illuminated books. But where modernist criticism, following Frye, argues that the sensorial apparatus cancelling the division between subject and object envisioned by Blake is located in the creative perception of the poet, a media ecological understanding of the creative perceptions of Blake's illuminated books – its sympoiesis, so to speak – locates such a cancellation within the environment of the medium. Frye correctly argues for an understanding of Blake's creative process where there is no division between execution and conception; however, by treating the illuminated book as an autonomous object of interpretation, executed and conceived prior to the act of reading, it seems that the oppositions upon which a liberal humanist subjectivity rests – the very oppositions Blake strives to burn away by the corrosives of his infernal method – are transferred and retained in the critical and aesthetic practice of modernism.<sup>555</sup> A comment on Blake's theory of knowledge is indicative of Frye's reluctance to abandon a hermeneutical model of aesthetic participation:

The common statement that all knowledge comes from sense experience is neither true nor false; it is simply muddled. The senses are organs of the mind, therefore all knowledge comes from mental experience. Mental experience is a union of a perceiving subject and a perceived object; it is something in which the barrier between 'inside' and 'outside' dissolves. But the power to unite comes from the subject. The work of art is the product of this creative perception, hence it is not an escape from reality but a systematic training in comprehending it. It is difficult to see things that move quickly and are far away: in the world of time and space, therefore, all things are more or less blurred. Art sees its images as permanent living forms outside time and space. This is the only way in which we can stabilize the world of experience and still retain all its reality.<sup>556</sup>

Frye concludes his comment by quoting a line from Blake's print *Laokoön* (c. 1815, c. 1826-27): "All that we See is VISION, from Generated Organs gone as soon as come, Permanent in the Imagination, Consider'd as Nothing by the Natural Man" (E 273), before finally stating: "To Plato, whose Muses were daughters of Memory, knowledge was recollection and art imitation; to Blake, both knowledge and art are recreation."<sup>557</sup> While there are considerable insights into Blake's aesthetics in Frye's study, it also becomes clear, not least from the way in which Frye himself uses fragments and dislocated statements to corroborate his interpretations, that such a study

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<sup>555</sup> Frye, 1969, p 93

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*, p 85

<sup>557</sup> *Ibid.*, p 85



is itself engaging in a configurative recreation. A brief look at Blake's *Laokoön* (Figure 78) suggests the media-specific environment Frye's criticism consistently overlooks (the lines Frye cites are visible slightly above and to right of Laokoon's head).



Figure 78: William Blake, *Laokoön*, c. 1815, c. 1826-27

The hellish printing house surfaces in Plate 15 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, while the “doors of perception” are cleansed in Plate 14. Plate 15 could thus be read as an expansion on the theme introduced in Plate 14, a reading supported by the fact that the concluding line of Plate 14: “For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern” seems to resonate – following the alluded platonic parable – throughout the exposition of Plate 15, where the narrator, very

much the exploring scientist in this fantastical realm, describes the partition of the printing house into six chambers. It is, however, a strange and rare architecture into which the reader is introduced. The method of transmitting knowledge starts with “a Dragon-Man, clearing away the rubbish from a caves mouth” (E 40) in the first chamber, and manifests itself in books and libraries in the sixth. There seems to be a progression, an exchange of meaning carried out between the different chambers. The plate reads as a description of the different stages of a production line – the labor division of copperplate engraving was at the time seen as a prototype for the modern assembly line<sup>558</sup> – though how the different stages of production in “the printing house in Hell” are interconnected is difficult, if not impossible, to visualize. The third chamber, for instance, is inhabited by “an Eagle with wings and 10 feathers of air”, which is not all that unfathomable – after all feathers are somewhat ethereal – were it not for the fact that the same eagle “caused the inside of the cave to be infinite”. A circumstance whose metaphorical interpretation is immediately halted by the turning of this immensity into the material building site for palaces designed and built by the “Eagle like men” living there. Rather than being connected by a structuring narrative or metaphorical system, the six chambers of the Printing House in Hell would

<sup>558</sup> Makdisi, Saree, *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), p 87



seem to be in a relation-of-nonrelation, enabling structural coupling, by indicating how they are at the same time open and closed.

Viscomi argues that Plate 15 is to be read as an allegory of printing where, for instance, the feathers correspond to the feather used to remove bubbles produced by the acid biting the copperplate.<sup>559</sup> Certainly this is a valid interpretation; metanarrative references to reading, to the artifice of text and image, and to the production of material representation, abound in Blake's work. However, when treating the plate as a configurative text, no such stable interpretation is at hand. It seems rather that, much as Blake's drawing on the copperplate is execution and invention in one and the same act, so every treatment of the illuminated book is an act of invention, involving the reader in creative configuration. The fantastic transformation of knowledge in the chambers of the printing house becomes an equally fantastic bridging, and breaching, of the subjectivity of the reader.

### **The William Blake Archive**

Reading Blake's illuminated book is a matter of confronting material resistance. It has already been noted that the media-specific materiality of William Blake's illuminated books posed a problem for the critical response to his work for nearly two centuries. To a large degree this is linked with the question of mechanical reproduction. Deliberately constructed in opposition to the typesetting of mechanical reproduction, the illuminated book produced by William Blake was not meant for mass production. Print editions of Blake's books had to be produced. Thus both within critical reception and editorial practice Blake has been handled as a predominately textual poet, generating reading practices focused on constructing a system by which to interpret and make coherent a body of text that in actuality had been severely crippled from the beginning. No more. With the launch of the electronic William Blake Archive in 1996 the reading of Blake entered a new phase. New media here emerge as the solution to the material resistance of the illuminated book, making it possible to reproduce and disseminate Blake's work without the high cost of facsimiles – albeit electronically remediated. The explicit goal of the archive is to function as “a unique resource unlike any other currently available for the study of Blake—a hybrid all-in-one edition, catalogue, database, and set of scholarly tools capable of taking full advantage of the opportunities offered by new information technology.”<sup>560</sup> The archive, by its mere presentation in the electronic format, makes two salient points. Firstly, by reproducing the visual exuberance of the illuminated book, the suggestion

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<sup>559</sup> “Though symbolic, the reference implies that Blake used acid that required feathering.”, Viscomi, 1993, p 81

<sup>560</sup> <http://www.blakearchive.org/blake/archive.html>

of treating these books as purely verbal phenomena becomes, if not ludicrous, at least highly tendentious. And secondly, the archive offers an immediate overview of the material differences between copies. In the spatial arrangement on screen material differences between copies generate a permutable network of textual versions, where no finite form is at hand. Interface tools such as the *compare* option, whereby all digitized copies of a chosen plate are juxtaposed in a separate window, further accentuate how meaning is produced not only within each individual copy but also between different copies. It is made clear that Blake's illuminated books constitute a networked art. In this sense, the archive, simply in its medium specificity, functions precisely as that scholarly tool it is designed to be. Insights pertinent to Blake's aesthetic mode are generated by the interaction with the archive, evincing how spatiality and movement of hand are as important as reading and interpretation for the experience and understanding of Blake's illuminated book.

It now also becomes apparent that the transformation of Blake into a verbal-textual poet is largely responsible for rendering his work overly opaque and difficult. By remediating his illuminated books in print versions, as has been done for more than a century, an epistemological density is introduced by the very reading practice pertinent to printed text. The supernatural and logically incongruent parts of Blake's poems pose insurmountable problems within a verbal-textual reading centered on the production of meaning. In this context, logocentric discourse collapses. The interruption of interpretation – the suspension of closure – emerges here as an event. At this moment in the work, play and motion, sensation and touch, supplement a hermeneutical reading. The participation of the reader becomes essential. But rather than being the active participation of an external player coming to the game, it is a matter of passive participation, of responding to and simultaneously becoming the agency of the game.

### **The vortex: material knowledge**

Plate 15 stages a comment on the production of knowledge. It reads as a critique of both the emerging print industry of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century – where editions of engravings, illustrating the works of English classics, predominately Shakespeare, were mass-produced to meet popular demand for a national cultural heritage, often with the work force of the artisans being usurped by crafty entrepreneurs<sup>561</sup> – and the optically biased epistemology of Lockean empiricism, where knowledge is transferred to the white paper of the soul. The plate's supernatural imagery – populated by Drag-

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<sup>561</sup> Morris Eaves elaborates the relationship between the artisan community, the proliferation and dissemination of reproduced art and the emerging class of capitalist entrepreneurs in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Morris Eaves, *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992)

ons, Vipers, Eagles, Lions and Unnam'd forms – evokes a vast register of symbolic interpretation, hinting at and luring with culturally grounded meaning but ultimately averting any tangible and stable ground. Fantastic hesitation reigns. Knowledge is not stable; it passes through stages of production, eventually ending up in books, arranged by “Man” – here apparently on the same level of ambiguity as the other monsters of this strange place – in libraries. A heap of scrap, no more.

Read in sequence from the previous plate, this fruitless process could be understood as man's confinement to his cavern, restricted to the limited perceptions of his body, which are to be expunged by the corrosives of the “infernal method”. Liberation from the cave is thus hinted at in Plate 14: the possible translation to an infinite realm of platonic forms. But then again, the process in the printing house seems to return knowledge to another type of cavern (most despised by Plato), the book; in this sense the plate critically reflects the subjectivity of liberal humanism, where the imprint of the external on the white paper of the soul is what constitutes knowledge. There is no liberating the soul from the body, simply because when it comes to knowledge, the distinction is not valid. It is the actual process that matters, “the *printing* in the infernal method” (emphasis added) and this consists precisely of the assembly line described in Plate 15. But it is a description that deliberately obfuscates and retracts what is said: it simply does not make sense.

A pictorial and typographical supplement is given. The opening sentence of Plate 15 is not concluded by proper punctuation. Instead, the spherical period mark leaks out, extends, undulates and transforms into a flowing line essential to Blake's iconography: the vortex. The vortex, according to W. J. T. Mitchell, is “an image that suggests both convergence toward a center or apex (the ‘inner being’ of the object) and doubleness, the interaction of contrary forces.”<sup>562</sup> It mirrors the dialectics of Blake's universe, a kind of negative dialectics that “pervades his entire cosmology, rendering it as a continuous process which never attains a final resting place.”<sup>563</sup> The vortex suspends distinctions between the external and the internal. It occupies a central role in the play between contraries that constitutes a major theme in Blake's work: “Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence” (E 34). The transmission of knowledge undertaken in the six chambers of the printing house takes the form of the vortex, presenting and at the same time retracting discrete units of meaning, involving the reader in the play and the process of production, but never ceding a finished product. It establishes a co-existence of contradictory properties, a distribution of agencies in an ecology never fully reducible to a whole. This is the “improvement of

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<sup>562</sup> Mitchell, 1978, p 72

<sup>563</sup> Ibid. p 75

sensual enjoyment” prophesied in Plate 14 and made possible by the methodological equation of knowledge and production. Knowledge is the act of production. Thus it would seem that, in the printing house in Hell, “the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul” has in actuality been “expunged”.

## Configurative books and men

Not quite. As it turns out, the linear reading largely generating the connection between the printing house and Plato’s cave hinges on a specific configuration of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. No copy of the book is like another. And Plate 15 does not always follow Plate 14. In copy G, printed in 1818, Blake has set the order of the plates differently, as follows: 1-11, 15, 14, 12, 13, 16-27. This is not unique to *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. In fact, Blake is known to have deliberately rearranged the plate sequence in many of his books, as a practice integral to his overall aesthetic method. Blake’s illuminated books offer, at best, in terms of semiotics, instable texts. Every interpretation is valid only for a brief moment of configuration, making the relation between different plates not a matter of connectedness but rather a relation-of-nonrelation, where objects relate to each other in the form of a momentary distribution. The sequence of copy G, provided the reader follows the order of the bounded plates, would thus offer a different relation between plates (Figure 79).



Figure 79: William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Copy G, 1818, Object 12, Object 13

Furthermore, the transformation of the typographical punctuation mark into the vortex of an ecological remainder is imperceptible in print versions of Blake's poetry. Erdman, for instance, whose ambitious *Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake* serves as the standard edition of Blake's work, has reduced it to the simple dot of the period: "." (E 40). Returning briefly to Plate 15, it becomes clear how the metonymical progression of the vortex produces narrative aporia rather than interpretative ambiguity. The text progresses inexorably, haphazardly, in incongruent chains of events. The concluding sentence is syntactically ambiguous, describing the arrival of the "living fluids" in the sixth chamber: "There they were reciev'd by Men who occupied the sixth chamber, and took the form of books & were arranged in libraries" (E 40). It is not entirely clear which grammatical subject "took" refers to. Harold Bloom, in his comments in Erdman's *Complete* edition, ascribes agency to "the class of men next to be named 'the Prolific'", letting them, as superior subjects, "complete the creative process" (E 899). This is a reading that leans on convention as well as the history of Blake reception, where a system of Blakean symbolism is erected. But it also presupposes a lineal reading, where Plate 16 – in which the notion of "the Prolific" is presented – follows Plate 15. As earlier noted, this is not necessarily the case.

It is feasible that the passive "took" refers to the "Men" themselves. This reading, although counter intuitive, is supported by the overall structure of the plate.<sup>564</sup> The assembly line of knowledge staged here is a metonymical process, where grammatical and semantic progression intertwines. There is a relentless forward motion – the motion of the vortex – that forces an abandonment of the previous, in the face of what otherwise, as with the third chamber of eagles, renders it unintelligible. This produces a reading where the men of the sixth chamber take "the forms of books" to be "arranged in libraries". This is a reading that, however luring its literal manifestation of knowledge transmission, presupposes and produces an interpretative breakdown – forcing the reader once again to re-evaluate and reconfigure – in order to be properly experienced. After a short hiatus, the dot of the punctuation mark is followed by the line of the vortex. At that moment, in between chambers and states, reader becomes book.

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<sup>564</sup> This is also the reading Bloom presents in his book on Blake: "We remember the mighty Devil Blake of an earlier plate, where he hovered on the sides of the rock and wrote sentences in corroding fire. The Eagle-like men prepare us for the fourth chamber of the creative mind, where the archetypes are seen as 'Lions of flaming fire, raging around & melting the metals into living fluids.' These metals were introduced by the restricting Vipers of reason; now they are melted down into the basic fluids of imaginative life. In the fifth chamber the metals are cast into the expanse of human existence by 'Unnam'd forms,' who are like the smiths of Yeats's Byzantium. Hell's Printing house ends in a sixth chamber where men take on the forms of books, and the finished creation is at last evident." Bloom, 1963, p 89

## Creative perception

The electronic archive changes the perception of William Blake or rather, it offers the opportunity of supplementing previous perceptions generated by print editions of his work. Jon Saklofske argues that the archive gives “the opportunity to perceive Blake’s corpus in a manner akin to his own creative understanding”<sup>565</sup>. Saklofske uses the variant editions of Blake’s illuminated book *Songs of Innocence and Experience* to support his argument. No other book by Blake was printed as many times; 45 known copies are listed in the archive. Blake’s method, says Saklofske, materially “establishes interconnective possibilities that support anti-systematic, multi-directional and even contradictory exchanges”.<sup>566</sup> The networked character of Blake’s work is made evident by the digital Blake archive.<sup>567</sup> Saree Makdisi suggests that “the organizing principles of modern scholarship – the book, the author, the work, the subject – might actually prevent us from seeing what is most significant about Blake’s work.”<sup>568</sup> The digital environment of *The William Blake Archive*, and the aesthetic operations which it facilitates, point towards forms of participation and collaboration that will inform the media-ecological aesthetics of the fantastic, as well as that of Blake’s illuminated book.

Material participation in the production of perception – creative perception – is integral to the aesthetics of William Blake’s illuminated book. The composite art of the illuminated book is properly understood as an art of configuration, and as such the secondary world of Blake’s mythology is grounded – it generates secondary belief – by the distributed agencies of the medium. The distribution of the medium, in an emerging environment whose aesthetics is characterized by sympoiesis, while being innate to the materiality of the illuminated book, is further emphasized by the digital interface of the William Blake Archive. The digitization of Blake’s illuminated books does not imply, however, that configuration should be understood as a digital operation. Claire Colebrook argues, in a Deleuzian reading of Blake, that his composite method is to be understood as an attempt at achieving a haptic art. Blake’s style, where repeated forms multiply, and the discrete unit plays such an important part, seems to support the digital. On the other hand, his art insists

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<sup>565</sup> Saklofske, Jon, “Remediating William Blake: Unbinding the Network Architectures of Blake’s Songs”, in *European Romantic Review*, vol. 22, No 3, June 2011, p 383

<sup>566</sup> *ibid.*, p 385

<sup>567</sup> However, by remediating the illuminated books in a fashion that reproduces print technologies, essentially keeping the integrity of each remediated copy, the archive neglects the opportunity of materially becoming an instrument of knowledge production. Instead of being a site of actual material configuration, where the nontrivial involvement of a reader/user would turn the hypertext of the archive into a cybertext where a cybernetic loop performs the “improvement of sensual enjoyment”, the archive in its present form reproduces the reading practice of print culture.

<sup>568</sup> Makdisi, 2003, p 13



on being organically produced, analogue. Blake's art, through haptic movement, strives to become a "mode of digital aesthetics that occurs beyond, or redeems, the analog-digital divide."<sup>569</sup> The haptic aesthetics of Blake's illuminated book confronts the notion of hermeneutic ambiguity by refusing to conform to a holistic conception of embodiment:

The Blakean corpus is a body presenting itself as the sign of a spirit that is at once more present than the mere surface of the text and yet his epic trajectories that continually end in seeming unification only to split apart and re-start, and his disturbance of character coherence (with aspects of the self taking on spectral form, only then to become characters with their own fragmentation): all these have an effect that goes beyond standard hermeneutic complexity precisely because Blake will work with the dynamic of incarnation while precluding the formation of a unifying body.<sup>570</sup>

The distributed body generated by Blake's illuminated book challenges, according to Colebrook, the autonomous subjectivity of hermeneutical modernism.<sup>571</sup> The haptic aesthetics of Blake's medium is affective, but it is not merely a reaction to the environment, resulting in a self-organizing experience. Colebrook seems to indicate instead how the creative perception of Blake's mythopoiesis is also sympoietic rather than strictly autopoietic, retaining a trace of the world beyond affective responses: "Blake does not only present what I will refer to as the distributed body within his poetry, he also formulates a distributed or haptic aesthetic, where the body is neither centered on cognition, nor oriented towards equilibrium or homeostasis."<sup>572</sup>

As already mentioned, Roger Whitson and Jason Whittaker propose the concept of zoomorphosis as a framework for the collaborative creativity at the heart of Blake's aesthetics. In *William Blake and the Digital Humanities*, Whitson and Whittaker essentially argue for a media-ecological understanding of Blake's illuminated book. Zoomorphosis describes how creativity – and creative agency – in William Blake's work is always situated in relation to an environment, temporally as well as spatially. Whitson and Whittaker conceptualize the work of Blake as a flat ontology in the form of a social network, where creative agency functions on the lines of Jane Bennett's notions of distributed agency.

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<sup>569</sup> Colebrook, Claire, *Blake, Deleuzian Aesthetics and the Digital* (London & New York: Continuum, 2012), p 31.

<sup>570</sup> *Ibid.*, p 79

<sup>571</sup> *Ibid.*, p 103, p 114

<sup>572</sup> *Ibid.*, p 115

For us, flat ontology reconfigures the hierarchical and epistemological model that dominates reception studies where the author's original expression is compared with his or her adaptation in other contexts and interpreted by the critic. By contrast, we imagine the entity 'William Blake' as an ontologically democratic network or society made up of everything from the ideas that inspired Blake to the material objects he used in his artwork, the animals and plants he ate, and the individuals who were influenced by his work. By creating new work, artists who adapt William Blake are actively adding to and transforming his network. The historical person named 'William Blake' is only one node in an increasingly complex society that continually defines and redefines what it is that is referred to when the name Blake is uttered.<sup>573</sup>

Whitson and Whittaker point out how the often unfinished and print culture-resistant materiality of William Blake's artistic production – the illuminated books as well as the material in manuscript form and Blake's printed and painted works – forced the 19<sup>th</sup>-century reception and ensuing canonization to create culturally and technologically working versions of Blake as poet and painter. Thus they establish Blake's history as a history of virtuality. In this sense, the digital William Blake Archive is merely a part of a larger, virtual archive, responding to the zoamorphosis of Blake's artistic method: "Print culture generated its own virtual Blakes, which in turn provided the ecosystem that enabled the Blake Archive."<sup>574</sup>

Whitson and Whittaker stress that this virtual archive should be understood as an ecosystem, and accordingly it is radically open, not merely to objects in a traditional sense created by Blake, but also to all other objects – adaptations, remediations, interpretations – responding to Blake's art.<sup>575</sup> These objects become part of the media ecology of William Blake, emerging as system-environment hybrids, products of the organization of the ecosystem, while at the same time affecting that very same organization.

### 3. Invisible Blake: *The Invisibles* as a medium of the fantastic

In the following section, the comic book series *The Invisibles*, written by Grant Morrison and published by the DC Comics imprint Vertigo 1994-2000, will be treated as part of the media ecology of William Blake. A brief discussion of some central aesthetic and thematic aspects of this comic book will further establish participa-

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<sup>573</sup> Whitson and Whittaker, 2013, p 12

<sup>574</sup> Ibid., p 33

<sup>575</sup> There is a risk, Whitson and Whittaker point out, that the digital William Blake archive, using technologies of software and interface that seek to retain the integrity of the illuminated book, becomes too closed as an ecosystem and thereby counteracts creative intervention and response. Ibid., p 48

tion and sympoiesis as central concepts for situating the mythic method of William Blake, while at the same time highlighting Blake's impact on the media system of superhero comics.

Though arguably not a proper superhero comic, *The Invisibles* nevertheless functions within the publishing segment of revisionist superhero comics popularized during the early 1990s and epitomized by the Vertigo Imprint under editor Karen Berger. Initially published as an ongoing series, the 59 issues of *The Invisibles* have been collected in seven trade paperback editions. Working with pastiche and appropriation, citing contemporary popular genres and media – film, television, science fiction, horror, detective stories and spy thrillers – but also different mythological traditions, as well as canonized and semi-canonized literature, and in particular English Romanticism and the works of Marquis de Sade, *The Invisibles* formulates a critique and a deconstruction of Western modernity and the individualistic ideologies of late capitalism. As such, *The Invisibles* strives to be a revolutionary comic, in both senses of the word: inaugurating a new temporality while at the same time subverting the notion of temporal progression, and enforcing a non-linear temporality. The deconstruction and critique of Western metaphysics is thematized explicitly, but more importantly for the present investigation it is a critique grounded in the ontogenesis of the medium, by enabling an aesthetics of ecological sympoiesis.

While the comic book series is structured in accordance with the rhizomatic logic of the assemblage, to a large degree functioning as a network of braiding, as Thierry Groensteen discusses in his theory of general arthrology, establishing connections across the 59 issues of all three story arcs, it is also structured as a chronological series of rites of passage, following the character Dane McGowan's introduction into the world of the occult and supernatural. A junior delinquent from the ghettoized housing projects on the outskirts of Liverpool, Dane is sent in the opening issue to a correctional facility secretly in the hands of the Outer Church, an ancient – and apparently malevolent – organization heading a world conspiracy whose ultimate goal is the complete subjugation and commodification, by way alien and ultra-dimensional technology, of human imagination and creativity. In opposition to the Outer Church is a network of resistance-terrorist cells known as the Invisible College. Reluctantly, Dane, who is too anarchic even by the standards of counter-conspiracy terrorists, is initiated into a cell of Invisibles, headed by the charismatic postmodernist pop-icon King Mob, a character whose multiple personalities include writer of supernatural horror, punk artist and an international assassin, amongst others.

In the story arc “Down and out in Heaven and Hell”, Dane is initiated, by the half-crazy, half-alcoholic bum-magician Tom O'Bedlam into the mysteries of magic and the true nature of reality. Or rather, he is introduced to the overlapping realities

constituting the hologram of existence. Walking Dane through the psychogeography of London, the two pass a giant figure of Urizen, submerged in the Thames (Figure 80). The image of Urizen is an adaptation of an image from Blake's book *The First Book of Urizen*.



Figure 80: Left: Grant Morrison, Steve Yeowell, *The Invisibles 1, Say you want a revolution*, 68; Right: William Blake *The First Book of Urizen*, Copy D, 1794, Object 20

When the initiation into the occult mysteries of the Invisible College is concluded, Dane is confronted with the ultimate source of their magical and reality bending power, an alien construct located at the far side of the moon known as “Barbelith”. The conflict between good and evil in *The Invisibles* is presented here as a conflict between two versions of human subjectivity. On the one side, there is the notion of an autonomous subjectivity in which influence always takes the form of a fall from grace and a loss of innocence, leading up to dominion and control of the fallen subject. This is the version upheld and represented by the Outer Church, with the transhumanist goal of mechanizing human existence. On the other side, there is the notion of an ecologically distributed subjectivity, acknowledging influence as an essential component of existence, in fact, acknowledging influence as the consummation of subjectivity that – according to Levinas – precedes existence. Visually, Barbelith, appearing repeatedly throughout the series, is represented in the form of a circle or spherical object, often in bright red colors. When Dane for the first time confronts, and is confronted by, Barbelith – in an episode that unfolds as a hallucinogenic drug experience – a second image from *The First Book of Urizen* is cited, albeit reconfigured and inverted (Figure 81).



Figure 81: Left: Grant Morrison, Steve Yeowell, *The Invisibles* 1, *Say you want a revolution*, 110; Right: William Blake *The First Book of Urizen*, Copy D, 1794, Object 15

The image of Barbelith recurs throughout the whole print run of *The Invisibles*, establishing what Groensteen calls iconic solidarity by way of braiding. Here, the comic book series functions as a network of assemblages, generating nodes of ecological sympoiesis, and situating the perception-event of ontogenesis – which is also the main theme of the narrative – in the materiality of the medium, as a given set of distributed agencies. Braiding thus reconfigures the temporality of the narrative, not merely by participating in the narration, but also by establishing several concomitant and contradictory narratives, ensuing in a multitude of perceived storyworlds. The virtual temporality of *The Invisibles* – multiple and fractured – becomes, at the moment of braiding, an immanent temporality, eternally present and undifferentiated.

While the non-linear and unconventional narration of *The Invisibles* aptly generates the kind of visionary and extrasensory perception Morrison thematizes in his work, and not merely in this particular title, it is also typical of revisionary superhero comics. Morrison, part of the so-called British invasion of American superhero comics, and thus in part responsible for establishing revisionary comics as a sub-genre and market category, makes this connection explicit by appropriating narrative techniques from Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*. The spatio-temporal dissolution Moore and Gibson establish in Chapter IV of *Watchmen*, where the quantum-state temporality of the superhuman character Dr. Manhattan leaks to the narrative structure of the comic book, is particularly operative in *The Invisibles*. At the same time, by basing one of the central plotlines of *The Invisibles* – a time-travel paradox – on one of the most influential story arcs of mainstream, pre-revisionary comics,



the “Day’s of Future Past” episode from Chris Claremont’s and John Byrne’s stint on *X-Men* from 1981 (Issues #141 and #142), Morrison clarifies how the experimental aesthetics of revisionary superhero comics is, at least to some extent, grounded in the cultural and technological environment and history of the medium.

The presence of proleptic and analeptic passages throughout the series – not merely the braiding executed by Barbelith – is made further explicit by the stand-alone story “Best Man Fall”, in *The Invisibles* #12. “Best Man Fall” tells the life story of Bobby Murray, a security officer employed by the Conspiracy, who is killed by King Mob early on in issue #1. The episode presented in issue #12 functions as an analeptic reconfiguration of the whole narrative of *The Invisibles*, establishing a contesting temporality as well as a complementary point of view to the narration. Employing a diachronic narration, where different historical moments of Bobby’s life are presented on the same ontological plane, without chronological connection or progression, this effect is further emphasized (Figure 82). Not only does the episode destabilize the narrative authority of the narration as it makes room for diverging perspectives – establishing a contesting perception on the same hierarchical level as that of the protagonist – it also becomes clear how the temporality of the series hinges on participation and configuration.



Figure 82: Grant Morrison, Steve Parkhouse, *The Invisibles 2, Apocalipstick*, (DC Comics, 1996), p 95-96



## Parasites: the material of language

In the end, *The Invisibles* does not make any sense. As there are multiple beginnings, repeated initiations into the supernatural and diverging and contesting reformulations of the narrative, there are multiple endings. The second to last issue offers what appear to be a conclusion of sorts, a confrontation and a culmination of the conflict between the Outer Church and the Invisibles. The last frame of the issue, set two years into the future and picking up a plotline alluded to in the time-travel narrative, even provides the caption “THE END”<sup>576</sup>. However, looking back, or rather being forced to look back here, at the end of things – following any number of the multiple vectors provided by the iconic solidarity of braiding dispersed throughout the issue (as well as the complete series) – nothing really makes sense. The narrative seems full of holes and moments of temporary amnesia: “Time’s still a bit iffy, sir. I’m not sure how I really got here”, as a member of a deep undercover counter-conspiracy cell known as Division X sums up after the showdown.<sup>577</sup> The reader cannot but agree. It is not even clear who really were part of the Outer Church and who were the Invisibles. As with Blake’s mythological figures, given point of entry, they all seem to intermingle. Multiple identities are never stable.

However, the very last frame of the concluding issue offers an alternative ending, and an ending that also seems to hold a key by which to interpret the narrative. In a final gesture toward the materiality of the medium, Dane directs himself toward the reader (Figure 83).



Figure 83: Grant Morrison, Frank Quietly, *The Invisibles 7: The Invisible Kingdom*, 285-286

<sup>576</sup> Grant Morrison, *The Invisibles 7: The Invisible Kingdom* (New York: DC Comics, 2002), p 262

<sup>577</sup> *Ibid.*, p 258

The last frame, and the blank page that seems to surround and unfold beyond the last frame, has been discussed at some length by the critical reception of Morrison's work.<sup>578</sup> It points to the metanarrative function of language in *The Invisibles* and as such clearly conforms to the notion of the revisionist superhero genre as a post-modernist and deconstructive form. But here Morrison is pushing deconstruction one step further; or rather, he brings out – by way of Blakean aesthetics – a media-ecological sensibility innate to deconstruction in line with Cary Wolfe's argument discussed in Chapter 1. In *The Invisibles* language is presented as the ultimate ontogenetic tool. Language creates worlds. But language is also represented – following conspiracy-prone science fiction writers such as Philip K Dick and William S Burroughs – as a virus, as the tool by which conformant identities are generated. The solution to this impossible bind accompanying any form of narrative is to stress the distributed agency of language, to argue, thematically as well as materially, for the participatory character of all narrative forms.

In an informative discussion, Chris Murray ties the immersive and recursive narrative techniques employed by Morrison in, if not all, then most of his comics, to the participation of the reader. As such, ludological techniques are central to Morrison's aesthetic practice, and Murray points out that riddles and word puzzles are recurring phenomena.<sup>579</sup> Murray further notes that the feedback loops employed by Morrison in the non-linear braiding of the comic book multiframe generate a form of immersion that is not merely a question of a willing suspension of disbelief. Instead, the immersion at stake in Morrison's narrative hinges on a more acute form of participation, not "primarily conceived as the participation in the 'make-believe' of the story, but the effect created by narrative and visual strategies that place the perspective of the reader within the point of view of the characters, a technique that Morrison favors in many of his works."<sup>580</sup> Murray's discussion, although stressing the importance of play and embodied experience, locates participation within the analytical categories of narratology. In the end, it would seem that the ambiguous perception integral to the medium of the fantastic – and to the apocalyptic and visionary aesthetics Morrison is practicing – still runs the risk of being limited to a strictly hermeneutical notion of participation. However, and despite his own conclusions, Murray's analysis reveals how a brief look at the way agency is pre-

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<sup>578</sup> See Clare Pitkethly in "Parasitic Signifiers", in *Grant Morrison and the Superhero Renaissance*, Darragh Greene & Kate Roddy (eds.), (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland 2015)

<sup>579</sup> "In Morrison's work the power of language is frequently presented in the form of fables which can challenge preconceptions, and indeed, break down established order.", Chris Murray, "And so we return and begin again", *Ibid.*, p 24

<sup>580</sup> *Ibid.*, p 19

sented in *The Invisibles* will indicate the pertinence of an ecological understanding of participation.

Two representations of the ontogenetic power of language are particularly salient in *The Invisibles*. First, there is the stipulated existence of a universal language, the language of aliens and gods, in direct relation to the very fabric of creation, and as such imparted with the properties of altering reality. This universal language consists of 64 letters and is kept hidden from the mundane world by both the Conspiracy and the Invisibles. Second, there is the existence of a mind-altering drug – referred to as Key 17, Key 23 or Key 64 – with the property of inducing a form of psychotic perception overriding the symbolic function of language. Under the influence of Key 17/23/64 words become perceptions.<sup>581</sup>

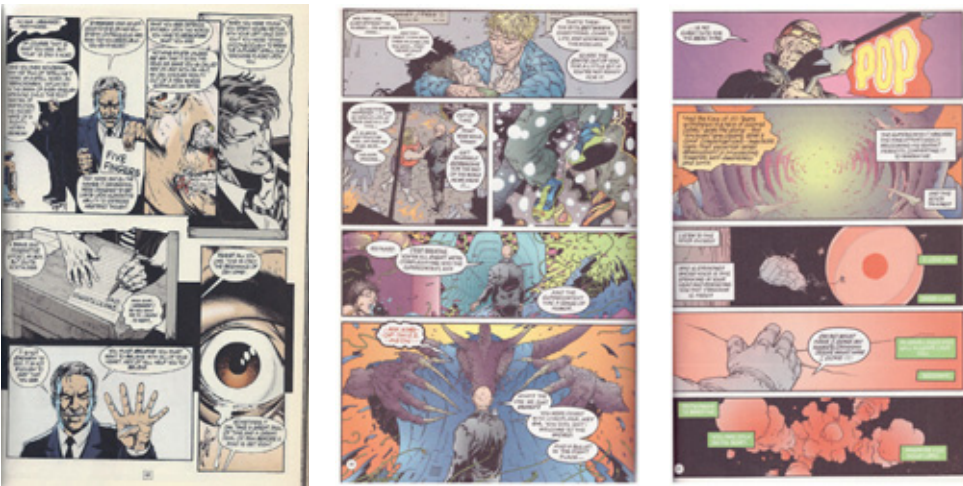


Figure 84: Left: Grant Morrison, Phil Jimenez, *The Invisibles* 3, *Entropy in the U.K.*, 63; Middle and right: Grant Morrison, Frank Quitely, *The Invisibles* 7, *The Invisible Kingdom*, 280, 281

While the influence of language here seems to serve a totalitarian ideology of control and commodification – an interpretation that is substantiated in part by the appropriation of the famous torture and brainwashing scene from George Orwell’s *1984* – it is nevertheless clear that a more complex understanding of agency is generated throughout the series (Figure 84). This is not merely a question of subversive appropriation, as when King Mob, in the culminating battle against the Outer Church, uses the drug against the ultra-dimensional aliens and thwarts their invasion by using a toy gun (Figure 84). Language is a parasite, but not in the sense that

<sup>581</sup> For a discussion on the relation between language and cognition, see Francesco-Allessio Ursini “Language and Thought in *The Invisibles*”, in *ImageText*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2015

it invades and controls its host. Instead, it functions as Michel Serres describes the parasite, as a quasi-object, not threatening the integrity of an autonomous subject but unveiling the ideological basis of such a notion in the first place: “If parasitism in general supposes that the host is a milieu or that the productions of the host constitute the environment, the niche necessary to the survival of the one placed there or who moves around there, we are all parasites of our language(s).”<sup>582</sup> Rather than as a threat or a salvation, the distributed agency of cognition becomes part of the (post)human condition.

Returning to the final and concluding page of *The Invisibles* (Figure 83), and situating it as part of the media ecology of William Blake, and specifically against the previously discussed sequence in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* where liquid metals are transformed into books and men, will provide an indication of the sympoietic function of language – and media – in *The Invisibles*. When Dane’s discourse, a rhetorical metalepsis directed at the reader, finishes in a word pun, the frame structure of the page dissolves, ending in a blank frame that is no frame at all but the background or gutter extending into background. Here the material environment impinges on the narrative. The fade-out in relation to the verbal sequence would seem to constitute an imagetext hypericon, generating a recursive loop, like the Möbius strip or Rubin’s vase.<sup>583</sup> The fragmented word in the last frame enforces reading as a haptic and affective process beyond – as Colebrook prefigures Blake’s artistic practice – the analog-digital divide. The figures in the last frame read as fragments of the word “up” from the preceding frame (Figure 83). This reading hinges on the comic book page narrating by configuring – following a restrained arthrolology – discrete units into narrative sequence, that is, transforming the digital into the analog.<sup>584</sup> Isolated, as a closed system, the last frame makes no sense. As part of the comic book page, the frame is read in relation to the preceding frame. However, it is precisely this form of naturalized mediation that is disrupted by the hypericon, revealing how the heterogeneity of the comic book page is a matter of a relation-of-nonrelation. The last frame is not connected to the previous ones. It is not a matter of sequence. The insertion in the last frame of the period mark, absent from the preceding iteration of the sentence, further enforces a denaturalization of the

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<sup>582</sup> Serres, 2007, p 230

<sup>583</sup> Circular, recursive structures, like the Möbius strip, are central to Morrison’s comic book aesthetics. Chris Murray notes how Morrison combines verbal recursion with iconic recursion: “Comics provide a unique opportunity to nest these different forms of recursive structures within one another, to merge them, producing a complex pattern of recursive structures at the level of text, narrative and picture, immersing recursions within recursions.”, Murray, 2015, p 25

<sup>584</sup> Morris Eaves discusses type printing and engraving as digital techniques and proposes digitization and the use of pixels as a way to read the history of picture making. Eaves, 1992, p 188, p 191

meaning-making process of reading. Following the recursive loop of the hypericon and the word pun, it is clear that while the frame containing “our sentence is up” is open-ended, as is the sentence, it is nevertheless read, conforming to conventional language practice and to the restrained arthrology of comic book sequence, as concluded, retroactively, in relation to the last frame. However, the last frame does not repeat a section of the preceding one as much as it reconfigures the preceding frame, adding a typographical sign to it. Returning to the last frame, the fragmented letters from the word “up” are not fragments at all, but rather the rune-like form of the two letters function as potential representations of the universal, alien language used at intervals throughout the series. And returning, once again, to the last frame, it then becomes apparent that the typographical sign is no sign at all but rather a presentation and representation of Barbelith, to whom Dane is addressing his discourse and who, by metalepsis, now occupies the position of the reader. Here, Barbelith, as the period mark in Plate 15 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* discussed earlier, takes the form of the vortex, establishing the comic book as an ontogenetic medium, generating that ambiguous perception by which it becomes possible, in the words of one of Blake’s most quoted lines:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour  
(E 493)

The media-ecological aesthetics of the comic book *The Invisibles* engages Blake’s mythology, not only by way of investigating salient themes in the Blakean oeuvre, such as the notion of creative perception, but more importantly by clarifying how the aesthetics of the superhero comic book presupposes and engenders participation. As such, reading *The Invisibles* as part of a Blakean ecology comes to the same conclusions as Mathew J. A. Green’s informative reading of Alan Moore’s comic book series *Promethea*:

Reading Blake alongside Moore allows for the deployment, within Blake Studies, of a relevant analytical vocabulary drawn from the newly emergent field of Comics Studies; reading Moore alongside Blake emphasizes that the graphic novel can become something far in excess of sequential art by exploiting the meta-narrative potential latent in the system of comics. Conceptualizing the illuminated books in terms of the relation of frame to multiframe serves to emphasize the fact that the boundaries of the text are negotiable and that the reader must play a key part in this negotiation. In effect, read-

ing itself becomes a process of framing, of working through the transition from text to intertext.<sup>585</sup>

#### 4. Members never before seen: adaptations of the *Divine Comedy*

During the last three years of his life William Blake worked on a series of 102 illustrations to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This work was commissioned by Blake's patron, publisher John Linnell, and remained in progress at the time of Blake's death, leaving the drawings in differing stages of completion, from simple outlines and sketches to more or less finished watercolors. Seven engravings were initiated, although never fully completed. Despite these conditions, the Dante illustrations have been deemed one of Blake's decisive aesthetic accomplishments. According to art historian Albert S Roe, the editor of the first publication of the complete series in 1953, "we find Blake at the height of his powers as an imaginative draughtsman in the Dante illustrations" and Milton Klonsky, editor of *Blake's Dante*, published in 1980, claims that the "continuous phantasmagoria' of the *Inferno* aroused in Blake, as it had for so many other artists over the centuries, all of his creative and imaginative powers."<sup>586</sup> The critical response to the Dante illustrations has to some extent focused on the question of fidelity – whether Blake is true to the source text in his illustrations or if they are to be understood as a pictorial critique of Dante's worldview, subverting his concepts of religion and philosophy by way of Blakean iconography. The latter is proposed as the bearing argument in Roe's study, a view shared to a lesser degree by Klonsky. While the argument has some merits – there is certainly a critique immanent in the Blakean oeuvre – the following, however, will argue that this critique is of a more general kind, being closely intertwined with the media-ecological aesthetics of his composite art. Art historian David Fuller argues that Blake gives a much more faithful rendering of Dante's poem than what is claimed by Roe and Klonsky. What they fail to appreciate is precisely the "flexible and constantly developing nature of Blake's symbolism"<sup>587</sup>. The fact that Blake uses a limited number of archetypal figures and shapes in his art, pictorially as well as verbally, is often mistaken for direct allusion and quotation. That, for example, similarities

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<sup>585</sup> Mathew J. A. Green "The end of the world. That's a bad thing right?": Form and function from William Blake to Alan Moore", in Steve Clark, Tristanne Connolly and Jason Whittaker (eds.), *Blake 2.0: William Blake in Twentieth-century Art, Music and Culture* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p 185

<sup>586</sup> Roe, Albert S, *Blake's Illustrations to the Divine Comedy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), p 39. Roe's book is the first critical edition. A limited edition of collotype reproductions was published by the National Art-Collections Fund, for subscribers, in 1922. Roe's edition is, however, the first official publication of the complete Dante series; Milton Klonsky, *Blake's Dante: the Complete Illustrations to the Divine Comedy* (New York: Harmony Books, 1980) p 8

<sup>587</sup> Fuller, David, "Blake and Dante", in *Art History* no 3, September 1988, p 362



between Blake's depiction of Ugolino and his depiction of Job, in the illustrations to the *Book of Job*, executed in the early 1820s and printed in 1826, should entail morally equating Ugolino to Job, in a direct exchange of values, is to misinterpret how this technique is part of an aesthetic mode that through blending archetype and cliché constructs and deconstructs systems.

Fuller's analysis is a forceful accomplishment, and his point is made emphatically: to a large extent Blake, in the Dante illustrations, finds material in Dante's own text, but also in the long tradition of commentary and illumination of the *Comedy*, which supports a Blakean subversion. Nevertheless, it appears that there is a considerable weakness in Fuller's argument in that he insists that Blake is literally rendering Dante's text in his illustrations. Klonsky too sets out from the supposition that "mere imitation of the text" is possible, implying that an illustration that could somehow be equated with the poem.<sup>588</sup> What Blake's Dante illustrations achieve is instead to be understood as responding to and highlighting moments of configurative textuality – the sympoiesis of a media-ecological aesthetics – in Dante's poem. Ecological configuration questions the very notion of textual integrity that underlies Fuller's and Klonsky's argument. In contrast, Morton Paley describes a kind of omnidirectional approach to the Dante illustrations, an approach accurate to the whole of Blake's work, highlighting its configurative textuality.

The hermeneutics of the Dante series is, as we can see, a contested subject, and, as we will see, no single approach will do for interpreting all the Dante pictures. In discussing the individual designs in the series, we must at times ask to what extent they are straightforward illustrations, to what extent they may depend upon a knowledge of the symbolism of some of Blake's other works, and whether some of them may be subversive of Dante's meaning.<sup>589</sup>

It is clear that the Dante illustrations, in some of their most prominent interpreters, provoke a systematizing and static view of discursively determined hierarchies, especially regarding the notion of originality and the relationship between image and text, but also that between artist and artisan. The point here is that the relationship between poem and picture that is established in the illustration is a reciprocal relationship: it goes both ways. Both the *Divine Comedy* and Blake's drawings are affected by being structurally coupled at the moment they are put in configuration. There is no longer any way of reading – as Roe often does – one without the other,

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<sup>588</sup> Klonsky, 1980, p. 15

<sup>589</sup> Morton D. Paley, *The Traveller in the Evening: the Last Works of William Blake* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p 116

nor even one before or hierarchically separated from the other. Text and image from now on form an ecology of media, an emergent experience in a distributed subjectivity. Adaptation occurs in the form of sympoiesis.

Valeria Tinkler-Villani points out that one of the main grounds for interpreting Blake's illustrations as critique of Dante's worldview is the inscriptions made by Blake in the margins and verso of his designs, "while the designs themselves are ambivalent, and can be read as endorsing the allegorical value of the journey."<sup>590</sup> From the position of liberal humanism, affect and participation is framed as an archontic structure, where configuration entails transferring an organization onto the environment. Structural coupling here is not sympoietic, but autopoietic. This bias for the textual as organizing principle, evident in Roe and Klonsky but also in the insistence of literal and straightforward illustration proposed by Fuller and Paley and the entailing generic separation and hierarchical – moral – structuring of arts and media, is precisely what the ecosystem emerging from Blake's adaptation of Dante's poem subverts.

The fact that Blake spent three years drawing scenes from the *Divine Comedy* is by no means mere chance. Dante played a significant part in the composite art of William Blake long before 1824, not because Dante had been appropriated by the English Romantics, which he had, but because Dante had been instrumental in developing the aesthetics of Romanticism. This, in turn, had to a great extent come to terms through translation of the *Divine Comedy*, linguistic as well as pictorial. In an investigation of the early translations made by Tinkler-Villani – within which she counts the drawings made by Blake<sup>591</sup> – she argues that "the Romantics did not appropriate Dante because his manner was similar to theirs: their manner had been partly shaped by the images, structures, and visions of Dante as these had been translated into English poetry."<sup>592</sup> An important part in this appropriation is played by pictorial renderings of the *Divine Comedy*.

At the center of the English reception of Dante is the episode in Canto XXXIII of the *Inferno* where Count Ugolino, frozen to his waist in Lake Cocytus, tells the story of how he was starved to death together with his children and grandchildren in punishment for treason. The sublime horror and otherworldliness of Ugolino – compared with the decline of neo-classical aestheticism – is what sets the ground for the

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<sup>590</sup> Valeria Tinkler-Villani, *Visions of Dante in English Poetry: translations of the Commedia from Jonathan Richardson to William Blake* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1989) p 273

<sup>591</sup> "Although traditionally illustrations are reckoned to belong to the field of figurative art, they are regarded here as a kind of translation. Like a translator, in his work on Dante Blake reveals the ways in which he read the *Commedia* and the forms and images which were available to him, and which he selected to give shape to his vision of Dante. These forms and images are often shared by poetry and painting, and particularly so in the case of Blake." *Ibid.*, p 19

<sup>592</sup> *Ibid.*, p 7

introduction of Dante in England, argues Tinkler-Villani.<sup>593</sup> Canto XXXIII was the first canto to be translated into English, by Jonathan Richardson in 1719, and the episode of Ugolino became a popular subject in the arts. In 1773 the prominent academic, painter and critic Joshua Reynolds presented to the Royal Academy a much-discussed painting of Count Ugolino.<sup>594</sup> Blake's friends Henry Fuseli and John Flaxman each executed works with the same motif: Flaxman in 1793 as part of a series of Dante engravings made during a stay in Rome and Fuseli in 1806, also presented to the Royal Academy, an event about which Blake wrote a letter to the *Monthly Magazine*, criticizing Reynolds's deplorable use, in his opinion, of Flemish coloring – and stating that Fuseli's version was “truly sublime, on account of that very colouring which our critics calls black and heavy” (E 768).



Figure 85: William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, copy C, Plate 16; Willam Blake, *For Children: The Gates of Paradise*, Plate 14, 1793; William Blake, *Illustrations to Dante's "Divine Comedy"*, Object 71, “Ugolino and His Sons in Prison”

Blake's rendering of Ugolino in the Dante series is in many respects similar to compositions appearing earlier in his work (Figure 85). The illuminated book *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790) and the emblem book *For the Children* (1793) display the motif (Figure 85), and in a portrait of Dante made in 1800-1803, for the library of poet and writer William Hayley, at that time Blake's patron, the figure of Ugolino appears in the background. Evidently, at least the motif of Ugolino had been a preoccupation of Blake's prior to the commission by John Linnell in 1824, and the

<sup>593</sup> *ibid.*, p 52-53

<sup>594</sup> Reynolds being a longtime antagonist of Blake. Blake, who could never enter the Academy, opened his notations in the margin of his copy of *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds* (1798), by stating “This Man was Hired to Depress Art” (E 635).

motif signals a relation with other work, not only that of Blake's own artistic production but also that of a contemporary cultural environment. In a sense, the motif of Ugolino functions as the braiding of a general cultural arthrology, an ecosystem that enables structural couplings.

The Dante illustrations remained in the possession of the Linnell family after Blake's death and only a limited selection of the drawings were on two occasions displayed – in 1893 and 1913 – before March 15, 1918, when the entire series was split up and auctioned at Christie's in London.<sup>595</sup> Until Roe's publication of *Blake's Illustrations to the Divine Comedy* in 1953, the Dante drawings were the affair of a limited circle of initiated. Nevertheless, the drawings occupy an important role in Blake's work – albeit not in the somewhat romanticized and teleological view represented by Roe. If not representing the culmination of Blake's lifework, the illustrations, in pictorial style as well as mythopoeic content, open up a network of cross-references within the Blakean oeuvre. Interpreting the Dante illustrations emphasizes the media ecology of Blake's work in particular, and the fantastic sympoiesis of his mythology in general. It becomes clear that the visionary and visual poetry of Dante occupies an important function in the media ecology that constitutes the fantastic, not only as the subject for the Dante illustrations but as one of the central figures of an eschatological tradition in Western culture. Emphasizing the fantastic, hybridizing mode of the Dante illustrations then becomes a more general statement about the role of the visionary tradition within Romanticism and, in extension, modern literature.

Of the 102 drawings made by Blake, seventy-two are based on the *Inferno*, twenty on the *Purgatorio* and ten upon *Paradisio*.<sup>596</sup> Morton Paley considers this circumstance to be something that “may be important, if only because Blake equated Dante's Hell with the material world.”<sup>597</sup> However, it is equally likely that the massive over-representation of drawings from *Inferno* is due to other circumstances, for example the sheer concreteness of the textual imagery in the first part of the *Comedy*. Whatever the causes, from the earliest 14<sup>th</sup>-century manuscripts onward *Inferno* is visually represented to a greater extent than the other two canticles.<sup>598</sup> The tradition of illuminated manuscripts and incunabula naturally plays an important role for

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<sup>595</sup> Klonsky, 1980, p 20

<sup>596</sup> *Ibid.*, p 8. In Roe's opinion three drawings places themselves outside of Dante's narrative, Roe, 1953, p 5f.

<sup>597</sup> Paley, 2003, p 115

<sup>598</sup> Millard Meiss states that “Among the illustrated Dante manuscripts of the fourteenth century more possess miniatures for the *Inferno* than for the two following *cantiche*”, but can offer no more than a weak and slightly contradictory explanation for this fact: “The dwindling of the illustration after the *Inferno* was no doubt due primarily to the size of the undertaking when the entire poem was involved. Painters probably avoided the *Paradiso* because of the difficulty of finding adequate visual symbols for it.”, Meiss, Millard, “The Smiling Pages”, in *Illuminated Manuscripts of the Divine Comedy I*, London, (1970), Peter Brieger, Millard Meiss & Charles Singleton (eds.), p 46

Blake's composite art, not only in the case of the Dante illustrations, in which he used a Vellutello edition, a commentary published by a 16<sup>th</sup>-century Lucchese intellectual in Venice, with engravings strongly reminiscent of Botticelli's illustrations of the *Divine Comedy*.<sup>599</sup> A profound conflict in Blake's artistic and philosophical orientation can in fact be traced in the conflict between the medieval, Gothic style – the style of “Living form” as opposed to the “Mathematic form” (E 270) of Greek art – and the pictorialist style of neo-classicism.<sup>600</sup> According to Mitchell, Romantic ideology and aestheticism is predominantly antipictorialist; major writers such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats favor the imagination as a cognitive faculty, “a power of consciousness that transcends mere visualization”<sup>601</sup> whose ultimate goal is the truth behind the luring pictures of ordinary fancy. This iconoclastic tradition permeates Western metaphysics, coming to the fore in discussions about generic boundaries between the arts. Within Romanticism, absolute truth is imageless, which is why language – written text – is best suited for its expression. Blake enters this tradition as a border figure between the Romantic mode of literature – a sublimated mode of literature, an ideal literature – and the Baroque, pre-modern mode. In Blake literature is visible language, an art without single perspective.

Blake's pictorial style and aversion to single perspective often aligns itself with an aesthetics of the grotesque. By way of agglutination and catachresis – the wrenching of objects from their customary places, the unexpected usage of a word outside of its common context – the grotesque imbues a narrative or an object with ambiguity. Here, the contemporary Romantic notion of the sublime is replaced by another version of the sublime, more akin, perhaps, to the postmodern sublime. As Morton Paley notes, “pushing the apocalyptic beyond a certain point of stylization moves it from the sublime to the grotesque”<sup>602</sup>. To some extent, this is precisely the case with the demons and monsters in Blake's rendering of Hell; they are not, at least not in any superficially conventional way, frightening or horrific. Instead they seem just mildly weird, disproportionate, and somehow out of sync. The three beasts – wolf, lion and leopard – threatening Dante in the forest are an excellent example. In Plate 1 (Figure 86) of the series, Blake depicts the wolf as a pictorial quotation of the Roman Capitoline statue of the wolf that suckled Romulus and Remus, albeit with disproportionate features, while the lion, showing the same disproportion, oscillates between a cartoonish, stuffed quality and the absurd hostility articulated in its insensate gaze and gaping mouth. The leopard, however, seems to be the one most afflicted by cata-

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<sup>599</sup> Paley, 2003, p 111f

<sup>600</sup> Hagstrom, Jean, *William Blake: Poet and Painter*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964) p 11f

<sup>601</sup> Mitchell, 1994, p 114

<sup>602</sup> Paley, 2003, p 124



chrestic displacement, hardly resembling a leopard at all, in its kinetic relation forming “a spectral extension of Dante himself.”<sup>603</sup>

Figure 86: William Blake, *Illustrations to Dante’s “Divine Comedy”*, Object 1, “Dante running from the Three beasts”



All three beasts as depicted by Blake are strongly reminiscent of Blake’s best-known feline depiction, “The Tyger” of the illuminated book *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (Figure 87); at the same time merging an oddly abstract and general generic character – a kind of ideal or archetypal animal form – with concrete anatomic contour and detail, enhanced by the fleshy coloring in the figure of the leopard and in the lips and teats of the lion and the wolf.



Figure 87: William Blake, “The Tyger”, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, , 1789, 1794, Copy B, Object 35, Copy F, Object 42, Copy R, Object 44, Copy Z, Object 42

The grotesque and Gothic, medieval qualities in Blake’s pictorial style generate what Mitchell calls “synaesthetic ambiguity”, that is, the recurrent transformation and transgression of perceptions, with the effect of provoking nonvisual sensations within the visual, presenting pictures that are more than visual, that are, for example, audial or tactile.<sup>604</sup> The synaesthetic ambiguous picture is in this sense a supernatural

<sup>603</sup> Klonsky, 1980, p 137

<sup>604</sup> Mitchell, 1978, p 60



event, something beyond description, paradoxical: the generation of an ambiguous perception. The synaesthetic effect is evoked – materially or metaphorically – by the tension between the simultaneous emergences of several modes of representation, and articulated via the sensory properties afforded to these modes.

Mitchell argues that the relationship between word and image in Blake’s composite art is constituted as an open-ended linkage and not regulated as a hierarchy. Image and text are in a radical sense incommensurable. Although the impulse to subordinate one to the other is an unavoidable consequence of reading and interpreting within a specific (modern) cultural environment, the image-text (which is to

be understood as the simultaneous emergence of these two representational modes) guarantees the inadequacy of every interpretation, thus always forcing the reader to reassess the result. To this extent, Mitchell describes a recursive loop of a system-environment hybrid. Blake’s composite art, says Mitchell, “is organized as a dramatic, dialectical interaction between contrary elements”<sup>605</sup>. But this is not a Hegelian dialectics, with an ultimate synthesis at hand, nor does it reveal – or hide – an underlying, mystical principle behind a seemingly contradictory reality. It is not a staging of the symbolic act of consolidating an unconscious – whether psychological, linguistic or political. Instead “Blake’s dialectic pervades his entire cosmology, rendering it as a continuous process which never attains a final resting place.”<sup>606</sup> This mutable poetics could be linked to another concept proposed by Mitchell, that of the already mentioned hypericon, or



Figure 88: William Blake, *Illustrations to Dante’s “Divine Comedy”*, Object 83, “The Rock Sculptured with the Recovery of the Ark and the Annunciation”

metapicture, which, as has been pointed out, functions as a feedback loop between system and environment, generating structural coupling.

Plate 83 of the illustrations to the *Divine Comedy* raises precisely this issue, of the ecological feedback of the hypericon, depicting Dante and Virgil standing on a ledge on the mountain of Purgatory, involved in what seems to be a discussion about two reliefs carved in the rock wall (Figure 88). The painting is only partly colored, Dante and Virgil in their regular red and blue, with the background sky and sea in dark,

<sup>605</sup> Mitchell, 1978, p 74

<sup>606</sup> *Ibid.*, p 75

bluish colors. The rest of the painting consists of outlines. These two reliefs, which through the attention of Dante and Virgil are presented as the center of the composition, are merely sketches, to some extent only suggesting their subject.

The scene depicted by Blake is an ekphrastic episode in the *Divine Comedy*, in which Dante and Virgil in Purgatorio X pass three sculptured reliefs on their way up the mountain of Purgatory.<sup>607</sup> The artifice of these reliefs, according to Dante, transcends not only the craftsmanship of the Greek sculptor Polyclitus but also nature itself. Here is art become living form, and this transformation demands exactly that particular kind of supernatural perception advocated by Blake. The first scene that Dante describes is of the Annunciation. Here, sensory impressions and media specifics start to intermingle. The relief of the angel Gabriel is so vividly executed that “One would have sworn he was saying ‘Ave,’”<sup>608</sup> (Purg. X, 40), and the image of Mary is entirely conflated with words and speech: “and in her bearing was stamped this speech: / ‘Ecce ancilla Dei’, exactly as a figure is sealed / in wax” (Purg. X, 43-45).<sup>609</sup>

The closing simile turns these two condensed tercets into an even more condensed and intricate folding of media and representation. Virgil then instructs Dante to be attentive to more than one impression at a time: “Do not fix your mind on one place alone,”<sup>610</sup> (Purg. X, 46), and turns the gaze towards the second scene, in which an ecstatic David leads the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. Here, Dante – as if literally responding to Virgil’s instruction – is stricken by an inexplicable sensation of synaesthesia. The marble sculpture evokes a conflict of the senses, causing Dante to hear and smell that which lies beyond visual perception. This is an altogether uncanny way of seeing.

There in the very marble was carved the wagon  
and the oxen drawing the holy Ark, because of  
which people fear offices not appointed.  
Before it appeared people; and all of them,  
divided into seven choruses, made one of my two

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<sup>607</sup> Closing in on the work, the modernist temptation of reading text and image as a hermeneutical whole becomes palpable. Roe, in his commentary, situates the scene in this fashion (Roe, 150), and Klonsky, while quite distinct about his subject being an illustration by Blake, still ends his commentary on Plate 83 by stating that a third scene “has been ignored in the illustration”. Klonsky, 1980, 156.

<sup>608</sup> “Giurato si saria ch’el dicesse ‘Ave!’”, Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, Translation by Robert M. Durling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p 160, p 161

<sup>609</sup> “e avea in atto impressa esta favella / ‘Ecce ancilla Dei’, propriamente / come figura in cera si sugella,” Ibid., p 160, p 161

<sup>610</sup> “Non tener pur ad un loco la mente,” Ibid., p 160, p 161

senses say: 'No', the other: 'Yes they are singing.'  
Just so the smoke of the incense imaged there  
made eyes and nose discordant as to yes and no.<sup>611</sup> (Purg. X, 55-63)

Continuing to the third scene – the story of Emperor Trajan and the widow – the ekphrastic description evolves into a micro narrative, relating the conversation between Trajan and the widow concerning the possibilities of administering justice for her murdered husband. On concluding the ekphrasis, Dante, in words akin to the composite art of Blake, states that: “He in whose sight nothing is new produced this/visible speech, novel to us because it is not found/here.”<sup>612</sup> (Purg. X, 94-96) This is a supernatural perception, not found “here” in the world of the narrator Dante. But it is, nevertheless, a perception emergent in the ekphrastic narration, as if the narrative, by engaging in the act of perceiving and enforcing a recursive movement between the different objects that are related, becomes a hypericon. Just as the mute and immobile sculpture, the narrative becomes a participatory medium, generating a new sensorial apparatus, a novel perception of the world, or rather the distributed perception of a novel world, a secondary world, a world of monsters and gods. Not here, at all, but in between the structurally coupled systems of image and text, Dante and Blake, this world and the next.

The emergence of an ontogenetic perception-event, entails, as has been argued earlier, on the one hand, a structural coupling organized according to the operationally ajar closure of sympoiesis. This is what Mark Hansen theorizes as a system-environment hybrid. On the other hand, this means treating the structural coupling of a system-environment hybrid as a heteronomous system, as an ecosystem, and that is why Hansen and Guattari stress the importance of heteropoiesis, and why Massumi insists that an emergent organization does not connect objects but establishes them in a relation-of-nonrelation. In this context, Blake’s aversion to central perspective and inclination towards a Gothic and medieval style, as well as his use of paratactic agglutination and grotesque catachresis, in both images and texts, function precisely as a reminder of the heterogeneous environment of sympoiesis. The many occasions where Blake pictorially traverses material states, merging bodily parts with material constructions, liquids with solids, movement with stasis, also fall within this category, as well as the dissolving of perspectival boundaries that often occurs when single perspective falters and foreground meshes with background. In light of

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<sup>611</sup> “Era intaliato li nel marmo stesso/lo carro e’ buoi, traendo l’arca santa,/per che si teme officio non commesso.// Dinanzi pareva gente; e tutta quanta,/partita in sette cori, a’ due mie’ sensi/faceva dir l’un: “No,” l’altro: “Si, canta.” Ibid., p 160, p 161

<sup>612</sup> “Colui che mai non vide cosa nova/produsse esto visibile parlare,/novella a noi perché qui non si trova.” Ibid., p 162, p 163

this, it is not surprising that Blake dwells on the transmogrifications of thieves and serpents in Cantos XXIV and XXV in nine drawings, of which two engravings were made (Figure 87). This episode in *Inferno* is wrought with fantastic imagery and grotesque hybridizations, the most striking perhaps being the merging of the six-footed serpent with the thief Agnello Brunelleschi, resulting in new bodily parts, “members never before seen”<sup>613</sup> (Inf. XXV, 75).

Figure 89: William Blake, *Illustrations to Dante’s “Divine Comedy”*, Object 54 “The Six-Footed Serpent Attacking Agnello” Brunelleschi”



Before the scene Dante – as narrator – pauses for a moment, which he often does, in a gesture of aposiopesis, making sure to point out the incredible character of what he is about to tell: “If now, reader, you are slow to believe what I say/that will be no marvel, for I who saw it hardly allow/it”<sup>614</sup> (Inf. XXV, 46-48) The use of aposiopesis – the stopping midcourse in a telling or oration, for reasons of emphasis – is significant.<sup>615</sup> Recurrently throughout the *Divine Comedy* the narrator points to the deficiencies of language, and to some extent also to the inadequate sensitivity of the senses. There is simply no accurate way of telling what he experiences, and at times – quite often, really – he is not even sure he is the one doing the experiencing. Instead, a new apparatus needs to be construed, a sensorium that can accommodate the heteropoiesis of the environment and where experience is not contained as the self-regulating organization of a strictly autopoietic system, but rather emerges as a distribution of agencies.

Mitchell claims that the ability of the image to ignore the obvious, to present something other than what it presents, is one of the ways in which it produces new experience. It is therefore necessary to pay attention to the limits of the medium: “We can never understand a picture unless we grasp the ways in which it shows what cannot be seen.”<sup>616</sup> The structural coupling of Dante’s poem with Blake’s images establishes the exteriority of the medium as part of the distributed perception of a

<sup>613</sup> “divenner membra che non fuor mai viste”, Dante Alighieri, 1996, p 384, p 385

<sup>614</sup> “Se tu se’ or, lettore, a creder lento/ciò ch’io dirò, non sarà maraviglia,/ché io, che ’l vidi, a pena il mi consento.”

<sup>615</sup> Richard A. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p 20

<sup>616</sup> Mitchell, 1986, p 39

media ecology Thus, Blake's adaptation of the *Divine Comedy* configures the poem as well as the visionary and apocalyptic tradition, bringing forth media-ecological sympoiesis as central to the aesthetics of Dante's poem, making clear how the language with which "[t]o make the new things clearly manifest"<sup>617</sup> (Inf. XIV, 7) is obtained by the embodied perceptions of the medium of the fantastic, in a sensorium of "members never before seen".

## 5. Phillip Pullman and the Book of Dust

The ontogenetic power of storytelling is a prominent theme in Philip Pullman's fantasy trilogy for children, *His Dark Materials*, published between 1995 and 2000. Throughout the three books – *Northern Lights* (1995), *The Subtle Knife* (1997), and *The Amber Spyglass* (2000) – the narrative repeatedly folds in on itself, pointing to the act of narration and the material environment of the narrative medium. The world-generating power of narrative, framed within possible-worlds theories, together with an emphasis – both implicit and explicit – on the intertextuality of storytelling, has led to the trilogy being repeatedly received as a postmodernist fantasy.<sup>618</sup> Pullman's polemic stance against the epic-heroic subfield of the fantasy genre in general and his critique of the fantasy narratives of Tolkien and Lewis in particular has been discussed at some length.<sup>619</sup> On an intertextual and generic level, as well as concerning narrative practice, *His Dark Materials* articulates as a configurative text. Scholarly attention has been brought to the manner in which the epic and visionary tradition of Milton is reconfigured, interpreting the trilogy as a reversal of the Biblical Fall and a critique of (dominant, orthodox) Christianity.<sup>620</sup> However, Pullman's reconfiguration of the epic tradition, and of the Christian narrative, though aligned to an intertextual and postmodernist aesthetics increasingly salient within the genre of fantasy (and children's fantasy) toward the end of the 1990s, is also heavily indebted to the aesthetics of William Blake, and more specifically to Blake's reconfiguration of Milton and the epic tradition.

The female protagonist of *His Dark Materials*, Lyra Belaqua, is an allusion to Lyca, the protagonist of William Blake's poems "The Little Girl Lost" and "The Little Girl

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<sup>617</sup> "A ben manifestar le cose nove" (Inf. XIV, 7)

<sup>618</sup> Maria Nikolajeva discusses *His Dark Materials* and multiple-world fantasies in relation to Foucault's notion of heterotopia. Maria Nikolajeva "Fairy Tales and Fantasy, from Archaic to Postmodern", in *Marvels & Tales*, Vol. 17, no 1, 2003, pp. 138-156. Attebery frames the trilogy within a postmodernist, poststructuralist critique of interpretation, Attebery, 2012, p. 164.

<sup>619</sup> William Gray, *Fantasy, Art, and Life: Essays on George MacDonald, Robert Louis Stevenson and Other Fantasy Writers* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2011), p 43f

<sup>620</sup> This is the argument of William Gray in *Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 164f

Found” from *Songs of Innocence* (1789), and the narrative is in certain central respects structurally aligned to that of Blake’s poems. Particularly the relation between Lyra and her parents, and the first chapter of *The Ambler Spyglass* (in the British edition headed by lines from “The Little Girl Lost”) where Lyra is kept sedated and under guard by her mother, are clearly coupled to passages from Blake’s poems. However, it is not the hermeneutic intertextuality of *His Dark Materials* that is of primary focus here. It could easily be argued that Pullman’s trilogy to some extent implements and elaborates on Blake’s version of the Biblical Fall. In addition to structural links, strong thematic connections clearly exist between Pullman and Blake: in one sense, the whole narrative could be read as a Blakean critique of authority. Pullman’s debt to Blake is not a matter of tacit allusion; in the afterword to *The Amber Spyglass*, Blake is cited as one – besides von Kleist and Milton – of three important influences on the trilogy. What is of interest here is not how specific structures and themes from Blake are reconfigured by Pullman, but rather the manner in which *His Dark Materials* incorporates the sympoietic aesthetics of the media ecology of William Blake. And more importantly, how this aesthetic mode affects the politics of Pullman’s reconfiguration.

Thematically *His Dark Materials* is centered on an entity called “Dust”, a concept Pullman borrows, and reconfigures, from the Bible as well as from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, where the dust from which God creates man corresponds to the dark materials of creation:

Of neither sea, nor shore, nor fire,  
 But all these in their pregnant causes missed  
 Confusdly, and which thus must ever fight,  
 Unless the almighty maker them ordain  
 His dark materials to create more worlds<sup>621</sup>

In the magical pseudo-scientific ontology of the fantasy secondary-world version of reality into which the reader is introduced in *Northern Lights*, the first installment of the trilogy, Dust occupies a position of immense scholarly controversy. Also known as the Rusakov Particles, Dust is a kind of elemental particle attracted to human beings and cultural artifacts. Throughout the trilogy, it is linked to the rise of consciousness and to sexual awareness. It is also linked to the possible-worlds cosmology established and investigated in the course of the three books.

The narrative of *Northern Lights* is set, as is explained in a brief preface, “in a universe just like ours, but different in many ways”. Stylistically, the narrative participates

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<sup>621</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, introduced by Philip Pullman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p 77



in a number of fantastic genres; using elements from, among others, steampunk, mythology, the visionary epic and science fiction, as well as westerns, animal fantasy and adventure stories, an alternate but palpably historical version of Europe is established. This is the world where Lyra lives, a Gothic sprawling weird Victorian Oxford where academic practice is heavily tinged by religion and the occult, and where a Reformed Calvinist Catholic Church wields an overshadowing influence – politically as well as spiritually – over the European continent from its seat in Geneva. In Lyra’s world, the human condition is defined by a symbiotic relation to a kind of totemic creature referred to as a *daemon*. Every human in Lyra’s world is accompanied by a daemon in the shape of an animal. The ontological status of daemons is peculiar. While they do have a distinct physical fastness, and interact with physical objects in the world, they do not seem to bear down upon the world; for instance, they do not seem to weigh anything, or at least not corresponding to their size, and at death – either that of the daemon or their human counterpart – their bodies disappear into thin air. Furthermore, it is only in puberty that a daemon takes definite form; until then it is a shape-changer, shifting at will between different animal forms. Despite their non-human forms, daemons communicate, mainly through speech (though some animal forms make speech difficult), and seem to have mental faculties corresponding to those of their human counterparts.

The function of daemons in *His Dark Materials* problematizes and – it could be argued – to some extent subverts the liberal humanist notion of identity and subjectivity. Clearly the human in Pullman’s trilogy is a nonhuman condition, and not merely in the sense that it incorporates an animal other within human subjectivity, but more importantly – and following the argument of this thesis – it sets up subjectivity as a distribution of agencies.<sup>622</sup> This is where Dust comes into the picture. Dust animates matter; it is what imbues the environment with agency. In a critical assessment of *His Dark Materials*, Lauren Shohet notes: “The trilogy does not separate metaphysics and physics, subjects and objects, but rather imagines the universe as animated by the particles of material consciousness”, adding that these “particles are the medium

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<sup>622</sup> A notion of posthuman subjectivity in connection with the configurative aesthetics of Philip Pullman’s work is discussed by Richard Gooding, “*Clockwork*: Philip Pullman’s Posthuman Fairy Tale”. Though Gooding does not discuss *His Dark Materials*, but focuses on the short novel *Clockwork* (1996), his conclusions are relevant to the present argument. Highlighting how consciousness and subjectivity are thematized as cybernetic feedback, Gooding notes that this feedback also affects the materiality of the narration, where different agencies, distributed among different media formats, are involved in the emergence of aesthetic experience: “his spreading of narrative awareness and responsibility across multiple perspectives and even editions points to *Clockwork*’s acceptance, at the level of literary form, of a mode of distributed subjectivity that stands in opposition to the autonomous liberal humanist subject.”; Richard Gooding “*Clockwork*: Philip Pullman’s Posthuman Fairy Tale”, in *Children’s Literature in Education*, (Springer, 2011), Vol. 42, p 320

of a monist and vitalist understanding of the cosmos”.<sup>623</sup> In the story world of *His Dark Materials*, Dust is the impetus to and the effect of self-organization, while at the same time enforcing the importance of a situated experience, and as such, as will be argued in the following, it is a thoroughly sympoietic concept.

With the concept of Dust at its focal point, *His Dark Materials* establishes a tension between interpretation and participation, where meaning-making is linked in a feedback loop with the environment. It is from this tension that the trilogy gains its overwhelming creativity. It is also this tension that explains why *His Dark Materials* ultimately becomes an aesthetically flawed book, where the narrative closure imposed by the trilogy book format, and to some extent by the fantasy genre, and corresponding hermeneutic and modernist aesthetic ideals, fails to accommodate the creative agency of Dust. Or rather, it is this tension that ultimately steers *His Dark Materials* away from the narrative closure of the trilogy book format, and not merely figuratively, as a postmodernist deconstruction of hermeneutic closure, but quite literally. Adaptations notwithstanding, since the publication of *The Amber Spyglass* in 2000, three additional narratives pertaining to *His Dark Materials* have been published: *Lyra's Oxford* (2003), *Once Upon a Time in the North* (2008), and *The Collectors* (2014), and Pullman is reportedly working on a formal continuation of the series with the preliminary title “The Book of Dust”.<sup>624</sup> The media specific materiality of these three publications is particularly pertinent to the present argument: *The Collectors* was first released as an audiobook, and subsequently in e-book format, while *Lyra's Oxford* and *Once Upon a Time in the North* were both designed to incorporate the materiality of the book as an artifact and physical object into the aesthetic experience of the narrative, merging the ludic tradition of children's literature with that of artist's books. Rather than continuing as a fantasy book trilogy for children, or for that matter as a fantasy book series, *His Dark Materials* is transformed, under the influence of the hitherto unpublished “The Book of Dust”, into a media ecology. The impact of the concept of Dust upon this transformation of the trilogy book format will be discussed in the following.

### **Ontogenetic media: the *alethiometer***

In the second book of the trilogy, *The Subtle Knife*, the consciousness and agency of the material world and the existence of parallel worlds are explicitly intertwined with the presence of Dust. This presentation generates a feedback against the narrative

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<sup>623</sup> Lauren Shohet, “Reading His Dark Materials”, in *His Dark Materials Illuminated*, ed. Millcent Lenz & Carole Scott (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), p. 29

<sup>624</sup> *The Book of Dust, Volume 1* is to be published in October 2017. The title “The Book of Dust” is mentioned as the formal continuation of *His Dark Materials* in an article, by Vanessa Thorpe and Jonathan Heawood, in the Guardian, 6 April 2003, citing a talk by Pullman. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/apr/06/books.booksnews>

established in the first book, in some important areas estranging the story thus far, as the notion of Dust presented in *The Subtle Knife* partly contradicts how Dust is represented in *Northern Lights*. To some degree this contradictory version is a matter of bringing forth aspects of Dust not attended to in the previous narrative, but it is also a question of adding new layers of meaning to the concept. Here, in the second installment, the function of Dust retroactively reconfigures the narrative of the earlier book, and it becomes clear that any interpretation of the first book had been faulty, and not only in the sense that the narrative is unreliable, although it is – in many ways *His Dark Materials* articulates as a postmodernist deconstruction of narrative stability and grand narratives – but more importantly because it becomes apparent that *Northern Lights* never was about interpretation in the first place. Rather it was a staging of participation as essential to meaning-making. While Dust is presented early on in *Northern Lights*, and functions as perhaps the premier enigma driving the narrative of the first book – a desire to learn more about the apparently contradictory and elusive Dust is constantly accumulated – it nevertheless behaves as a rather conventional plot device in a fantasy adventure narrative. Though Dust can be seen to occupy the liminal position necessary to the fantastic, in Todorov's sense, it is also, and in *Northern Lights* particularly so, linked to a specific interpretation of the narrative and as such, it is imbued with certain meaning-making properties. More specifically, it is from the very beginning tied to the prophesized role the protagonist Lyra has to play as the new Eve in Pullman's Blakean reading of *Paradise Lost*, where Lyra's inevitable confrontation with experience will overcome the dualist splintering of existence.<sup>625</sup> But rather than functioning as corroboration of possible-world theories – where a vital materialism would subvert the mind-body duality and disprove its corresponding, in Lyra's world at least, division of existence into the realms of heaven and hell – Dust seems to behave, in *Northern Lights*, precisely as that teleological guiding principle identified with divine predestination, enforcing an interpretation of the narrative that conflicts with its participatory aesthetics. Thus Dust, as it is represented in *Northern Lights*, seems to coincide with the authorial function of the hermeneutic model of reading; it is the sender of a message whose meaning is to be properly received through interpretation.

If the central theme of *His Dark Materials* is experience and the fall from innocence, the act of gaining knowledge is predominantly figured in *Northern Lights* as conforming to the modern, and dualist, hermeneutical model of understanding and knowing. In fact, it could be argued that the narrative performs the hermeneutic notion of reading. The very opening scene of the book, where Lyra and her daemon Pantalaimon hide in the wardrobe of the Retiring Room at Jordan College,

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<sup>625</sup> Gray, 2009, p 183

scrutinizing, at the behest of her father Lord Asriel, the reactions of the scholars to Asriel's presentation of a series of images of Dust, sets the tone. Cognizing here takes the form of interpretation from a position of exteriority. The knowing subject is distanced and unaffected, gaining knowledge by an act of gradual appropriation. Accordingly, the narrative of *Northern Lights* largely follows the rhetoric of a portal-quest fantasy, where knowledge of the world, and of the plot, is revealed following the protagonist's transition from one place to another.<sup>626</sup> This does not mean that the process of knowing in *Northern Lights* is parallel between protagonist and reader. Quite the contrary, the narrative soon establishes, and derives much tension from, cognitive discrepancies between that of the reader and of the protagonist Lyra. Early on in the book a prophecy concerning Lyra's future fate is mentioned when the Master and the Librarian of Jordan College discuss the events unfolded in the Retiring Room, and where it is revealed that Lyra will have a major part to play in the destiny of her world. While it is not clear what events are exactly at hand, Lyra's future seems from the very beginning to be tied to overwhelming and cataclysmic changes, possibly on a cosmological scale. It is crucial to the prophecy, however, that Lyra remains oblivious of her destiny, as

it involves a great betrayal. It is not Lyra who will be betrayed, the Master explains: "No, no, that's the saddest thing: *she* will be the betrayer, and the experience will be terrible. She mustn't know that, of course, but there's no reason for her not to know about the problem of Dust."<sup>627</sup>

To aid in her quest, the Master of Jordan College gives Lyra a mechanical device known as an *alethiometer* (Figure 90). This device, in the shape of a golden compass (hence the American title of the book), is a divinatory instrument, literally a truth-meter, with which to configure, by way of symbols, hands and wind-up wheels, future events:



Figure 90, *The Golden Compass, The Graphic Novel*, adaptation Stéphane Melchior, art Clement Oubrierie, transl. Annie Eaton, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), np.

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<sup>626</sup> Farah Mendlesohn discusses the rhetoric structures of the portal-quest fantasy. Mendlesohn, 2007, Chapter 1

<sup>627</sup> Philip Pullman, *Northern Lights* (London: Scholastic, 1995), p 33

It lay heavily in her hands, the crystal face gleaming, the golden body exquisitely machined. It was very like a clock, or a compass, for there were hands pointing to places around the dial, but instead of the hours or the points of the compass there were several little pictures, each of them painted with extraordinary precision, as if on ivory with the finest and slenderest sable brush. She turned the dial around to look at them all. There was an anchor; an hourglass surmounted by a skull; a chameleon, a bull, a beehive... Thirty-six altogether, and she couldn't even guess what they meant.<sup>628</sup>

Taking upon herself the task of rescuing her friend Roger from a malevolent, child-snatching organization known as the "The Oblation Board", and at the same time delivering the alethiometer to her father in the North, Lyra embarks on what she perceives as her own personal quest. Through her adventures she is aided by the alethiometer, which she soon learns to read, purely by intuition. Powered by Dust, the alethiometer provides information at pivotal points in the narrative. Concentrating on the movements of the hands and the symbols, letting her attention and sensation be steered by the object – "I just make my mind go clear and then it's sort of like looking down into water. You got to let your eyes find the right level, because that's the only one that's in focus."<sup>629</sup> – Lyra configures divinations. Her reading of the alethiometer is presented more as a matter of participating in a distributed perception than as an act of interpretation, following a system or given set of codes, a number of symbols. Nevertheless, the narrative function of the alethiometer, in *Northern Lights*, is that of transmitting a certain amount of meaning, foretold and presumably unaffected by the transmission. On the one hand, then, it appears that Lyra is constantly configuring the narrative, at every junction in the story where she uses the alethiometer, and as such, she is in a sense taking part in the construction of her own destiny, that is, on a quest to aid Lord Asriel and save her friend Roger. On the other hand, and unknown to Lyra, if not to the reader, her configurations are aligned to a different fate, prophesized and predestined – a fate known not only by the Master of Jordan College but by other fantastic creatures of Lyra's world as well – and against this foretold meaning Lyra's interpretations of the alethiometer are faulty. As long as Dust, as in *Northern Lights*, represents divine knowledge and a pre-ordained order – the supernatural knowledge of the spirit world – the alethiometer functions according to the hermeneutic model of reading and not as a participatory medium regulated by cybernetic feedback.

At the end of *Northern Lights*, the nature of the sacrifice is finally revealed. Rather than saving her friend Roger, Lyra is responsible for his death, as Lord Asriel uses

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<sup>628</sup> Ibid., p 79

<sup>629</sup> Ibid., p 173

Roger as an energy source in order to open a passage between parallel universes. This is the prophecy the reader, but not Lyra, has learned about early on, and against which Lyra's actions and her interpretations of the alethiometer have been measured and continuously adjusted throughout the narrative. But what might perhaps, at first sight, appear as a simple subversion of a number of generic expectations, both pertaining to the fantasy genre and that of children's literature – when it becomes clear that Lyra's parents are far from benevolent savior figures and that her own heroic journey is far from unproblematic – is in fact much more complicated, as the function of Dust here points to a tension between interpretation and participation.

At the end of *Northern Lights* it would appear that Dust has been powering the prophecy, and as such seemingly been functioning as divine omniscience and predestination. Similarly, Lord Asriel is interpreting Dust as a representation of divine authority. To Lord Asriel, and to a fantasy narrative following a Christian dualist cosmology, Dust is thus equated to the dark materials from which God creates worlds, and as such it comports to His will. Accordingly, Dust, in Lord Asriel's rebellion, must be destroyed, alongside the Kingdom of Heaven. This is a valid interpretation, and on a certain level Dust corresponds to the Miltonian "His dark materials" alluded to in the epigraph to *Northern Lights*. And there is certainly an amount of intentionality ascribed to Dust throughout the trilogy, that, as has been pointed out, conflicts with the distributed agency of Dust as a media ecology. Nevertheless, Lord Asriel's understanding of Dust is flawed, just as Lyra's interpretation of the alethiometer is, as is the reader's interpretation of the prophecy in *Northern Lights*, and not because it is an interpretation that fails to accommodate the complexities of the material at hand but because they all – Lyra, Asriel and the reader – have failed to acknowledge the extent to which interpretation here also entails participation. This is understandable, as the relation between Dust and participation only becomes clear in the second book of the trilogy, *The Subtle Knife*.

After learning more about Dust in *The Subtle Knife*, it is connected to quantum physics and dark matter. Stressing feedback and configuration as instrumental to the emergence of consciousness, the narrative climax of the first book in the trilogy comes into new light. If Dust functions as the feedback of second-order cybernetic systems, as an event of sympoiesis, the extent to which both Lyra and Lord Asriel, as well as the reader, are responsible for configuring their own narrative must now be taken into consideration. Rather than failing to interpret the alethiometer, Lyra's actions, and the ensuing and prophesized narrative, appear as the emergence of a distributed agency. The outcome of *Northern Lights* then becomes a sympoietic text: configured from its environment, but at the same time as it is configured it becomes other, it becomes something never seen before, a novel organization of the environment from which it emerges. And this is what a hermeneutic model of reading



cannot accommodate, that interpretation as participation generates a new material world, always already encompassing the old. Here, such transcendental concepts as originator and closure are discarded. Precisely for this reason, Lord Asriel's rebellion is doomed to failure, as is ultimately the trilogy book format of Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, as they both – Lord Asriel by the force of deicide and ensuing apotheosis and *His Dark Materials* by dint of the trilogy book format – enforce an archontic configuration, where everything is concluded and connected. Calling out to Mrs Coulter to join him, before stepping through to the other world, this is what Lord Asriel fails to comprehend, that creation is always a matter of co-creation, of an ecological feedback evincing the heterogeneity of a relation-of-nonrelation. Instead, Lord Asriel seeks to supplant and take on the role of creator and originator for himself.

“Come with me!” he said, urgent, powerful. “Come and work with me!”

“We couldn't work together, you and I.”

“No? You and I could take the universe to pieces and put it together again. We could find the source of Dust and stifle it forever!”<sup>630</sup>

## The media ecology of Dust

As Katharine Cox notes, Dust has an ecological function within the narrative of *His Dark Materials*, a function that at certain moments invites media-ecological sym-  
poiesis.<sup>631</sup> Furthermore, Dust plays an important part in the configurative aesthetics of the intersecting storyworlds of *His Dark Materials*, as it takes on any number of meanings and representations, seemingly contesting any singular meaning, while simultaneously provoking interpretation.<sup>632</sup> Nevertheless, it is when a singular meaning is conferred on the function of Dust and it becomes a vehicle for a distinct criti-

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<sup>630</sup> Ibid., p 393f

<sup>631</sup> Katherine Cox, “‘Imagine *Dust* with a Capital Letter’: Interpreting the Social and Cultural Contexts for Philip Pullman's Transformation of Dust”, in ed. Steven Barfield & Katharine Cox, *Critical Perspectives on Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2011), p. 137

<sup>632</sup> Katharine Cox writes, in an article investigating the social and cultural transformations of Dust: “Dust is significant and pervasive in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*. This Dust is elevated above ordinary dust through the use of a capital letter, is intrinsically linked to the characters central quest and is an ever-present motif that connects the multi-worlds of Pullman's vision. Of particular note is the initial ambiguity of the Dust and its development within the trilogy, as it is variously interpreted as original sin, evil, good, consciousness, light, dark matter and wisdom by those who encounter it. As a result, the interpretation of Dust is fundamental to the narrative forming the detective pulse at the heart of the books, as the protagonists and reader try to unravel the meaning of Dust. The repeated misunderstandings about Dust within the trilogy, and the competing attempts by the characters to control, destroy or understand it, would appear to make a singular reading of Dust difficult.”, Cox, 2011, p. 126

cal position, as in the case of Lyra's faulty reading of the alethiometer, that the traces of the configurative textuality of sympoiesis become particularly salient. The participatory function of Dust in *Northern Lights* only becomes apparent retroactively, under the influence of *The Subtle Knife*, in the form of a structural coupling, where it is precisely the fact that Dust behaves differently in the first book that stresses the relation between the books as sympoietic. Dust, in all its different and contradictory emanations, is now tied to configuration. Thus the intertextual function of *His Dark Materials* becomes one of reconfiguration, in actuality affecting the cultural environment from which the novel configuration emerges. Lauren Shohet conceptualizes this form of reconfiguration as a "writerly agency" consisting of a distributed perception, whereby the different objects of an intertextual network mutually affect each other. The emphasis on media technologies and their relation to feedback and self-regulation – exemplified most explicitly by the amber spyglass (by which Dust can be perceived by the human eye) and the golden compass – becomes a metaphor, Shohet argues, for the participatory reading of the books.<sup>633</sup>

Despite the ecological and configurative function of Dust, it nevertheless seems that the trilogy strives for narrative closure when, in the final volume, after Lord Asriel's epic battle with the Authority and Lyra's and Will's destruction of the afterlife and subsequent fall from sexual innocence, the passages between worlds are closed, in order to prevent Dust from leaking out of existence, an event, it is said, that would leave the universes inanimate. As Mary notes in a key passage in *The Amber Spyglass*:

And if it [the leakage of Dust] wasn't stopped all conscious life would come to an end. As the mulefa had shown her Dust came into being when living things became conscious of themselves; but it needed some feedback system to reinforce it and make it safe, as the mulefa had their wheels and the oil from the trees. Without something like that, it would all vanish. Thought, imagination, feeling, would all wither and blow away, leaving nothing but a brutish autonomism; and that brief period when life was conscious of itself would flicker out like a candle in every one of the billions of worlds where it had burned brightly.<sup>634</sup>

At the end of *The Amber Spyglass*, Will and Lyra return to their respective worlds, and as the world-breaching technologies are destroyed, they are prevented from seeing

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<sup>633</sup> Shohet offers a reading of Mary Malone's stay with the Mulefa and her invention of the amber spyglass as a metaphor for intertextuality as reconfiguration. Using only one lens, the dust cannot be perceived, but by holding two lenses at a handbreadth, a novel sense of vision emerges. In this sense, the intertextual relations between texts generate new visions, new versions: "Its text and pre-texts separated by a writerly handbreadth, anointed with the fruits of "fallen" self-consciousness, the amber spyglass works like the trilogy itself." Shohet, 2005, p 31

<sup>634</sup> Philip Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass* (London: Scholastic, 2000), p 453

each other again. This closing off of parallel worlds would seem to indicate, against the configurative and ontogenetic function of the Dust-powered media operative throughout the trilogy, that subjectivity, and worlds, are closed phenomena, systems that organize themselves without any relation to the environment, holistically closed and not ecologically open. This narrative closure, at the end of what in many respects appears to be a postmodernist and deconstructive work of literature, is puzzling. Where the tension between interpretation and participation inherent in the concept of Dust up to this point has been highly productive, generating a large number of possible reconfigurations, both thematically and structurally, there is here a discernable shift towards a structuring metaphysics, according to which Dust becomes a purified and essentialist representation of consciousness.<sup>635</sup> Rather than stressing the relation between system and environment, as does a sympoietic understanding of autopoiesis, it would appear that *His Dark Materials* in the end argues for self-regulation as a necessarily autonomous activity, thus enforcing a notion of ecology as dependent on a pre-existent, and in this context essentially divine, natural order.

Reading Pullman's trilogy against Derrida's critique of closure, Anne-Marie Bird points out that the attempt at positing Dust as a unifying principle and supplementary grand narrative is contested by the very undecidability of the concept (as all concepts remain traces of its others).<sup>636</sup> With Dust, Pullman creates a system, argues Bird, but a system "characterized by contingency and uncertainty" and as such, accommodating the aporia of presence.<sup>637</sup> Following Bird's deconstructive reading of *His Dark Materials*, but with a slight shift of focus away from a semiotically oriented reading of the trilogy, the aporia of presence can instead be understood as a tension between interpretation and participation. The concluding elevation of Dust to structuring principle at the end of *The Amber Spyglass* is thus perfectly viable, clearly representing a measure of truth, while at the same time – retaining traces of the environment from which such an elevation emerges – being open, not merely conceptually but also materially, to reconfiguration. Just as *The Subtle Knife* reconfigured the function of Dust in *Northern Lights*, the notion of Dust presented in the conclusion of *The Amber Spyglass* can be amended and supplemented. This, however, entails leaving the trilogy book format, both materially and as a structuring narrative principle. Which is precisely the reason why the passages between worlds had to be

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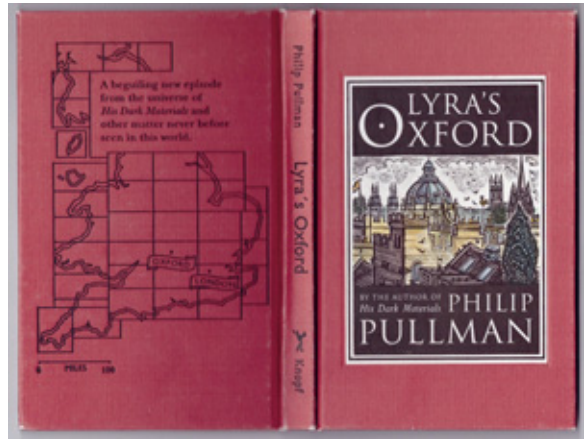
<sup>635</sup> This somewhat unexpected turn seems to contradict, as Katherine Cox notes, the very heart of the concept of Dust, which has throughout the narrative resisted the authoritative interpretations imposed on it by the various contesting fractions: "Ironically though, Pullman himself repeats this narrowing of interpretation by imposing a singular meaning on Dust," Cox, 2011p. 129

<sup>636</sup> Anne-Marie Bird, "Dust as an Alternative Theological Vision", in *His Dark Materials Illuminated*, ed. Millicent Lenz & Carole Scott (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 194f

<sup>637</sup> Bird, 2005, p 197

closed off in the first place, in order for worlds, and books as well as other media, to function as independent ecosystems, structurally coupled but never connected.

Figure 91, Philip Pullman,  
*Lyra's Oxford*. (New York:  
Alfred A. Knopf, 2003)



In the ongoing project with a continuation to *His Dark Materials*, a project that, as mentioned above, has the working title “The Book of Dust”, several publications have seen the light of day, the first of which was the short but materially highly interesting book

*Lyra's Oxford*, in 2003 (Figure 91). *Lyra's Oxford* opens with a preface in which Dust is explicitly connected to the ontogenesis of configurative texts. Here, the book is presented as a collection of things, as a number of found objects that may or may not be connected to the story it narrates. In fact, storytelling is presented in the preface as the event of grouping together a given number of objects. In the preface, and in the short narrative that ensues and by the materiality of the specific book, it is perfectly clear that the narrative closure of *His Dark Materials* is reconfigured, and furthermore, that it is a reconfiguration which entails formulating a new set of reading tools. Reading is presented here as a configurative practice that generates stories by sympoiesis. It is a practice that does not adhere to the chronology of narrative closure but rather reconfigures, as an emergent phenomenon, chronology and closure.

All these tattered old bits and pieces have a history and a meaning. A group of them together can seem like the traces left by an ionizing particle in a bubble chamber: they draw the line of a path taken by something too mysterious to see. That path is a story, of course. What scientist do when they look at the line of bubbles on the screen is work out the story of the particle that made them: what sort of particle it must have been and what caused it to move in that way, and how long it was likely to continue.

Dr. Mary Malone would have been familiar with that sort of story in the course of her search for dark matter. But it might not have occurred to her, for example, when she sent a postcard to an old friend shortly after arriving in Oxford for the first time, that that card itself would trace part of a story that hadn't yet happened when she wrote it. Perhaps some particles move backward in time; perhaps the future affects the past in some way

we don't understand; or perhaps the universe is simply more aware than we are. There are many things we haven't yet learned how to read.<sup>638</sup>

*Lyra's Oxford* narrates a short episode in Lyra's life two years after her parting from Will at the end of *The Amber Spyglass*. Enrolled at school and living a slightly more organized life than earlier, Lyra and Pantalaimon, who has now become fixed in the form of a pine marten, are ensnared in a plot against their lives. What first appears to be a rescue mission is revealed to be an ambush, when an embittered witch, whose son perished in Lord Asriel's war against the Authority, a death for which she blames Lyra, seeks vengeance. The witch's attack is, however, thwarted when the birds of Oxford come to Lyra and Pantalaimon's aid. This episode presents a number of potential new characters and plotlines for future stories, both within the actual text of the narrative – the plot involves an alchemist who mysteriously hints at strange and hidden quests – and in the form of paratexts. Some of these paratexts are referred to in the text, such as a map and a page from a guide book of the part of Oxford in which the story unfolds, while others appear as found objects, disparate and apparently without any clear connection to the narrative: most notably a postcard from Mary Malone and an advert and time-table for a cruise ship (Figure 92). These objects, together with the brief narrative and the illustrations and book design, clearly correspond to the “old bits and pieces” referred to in the preface.

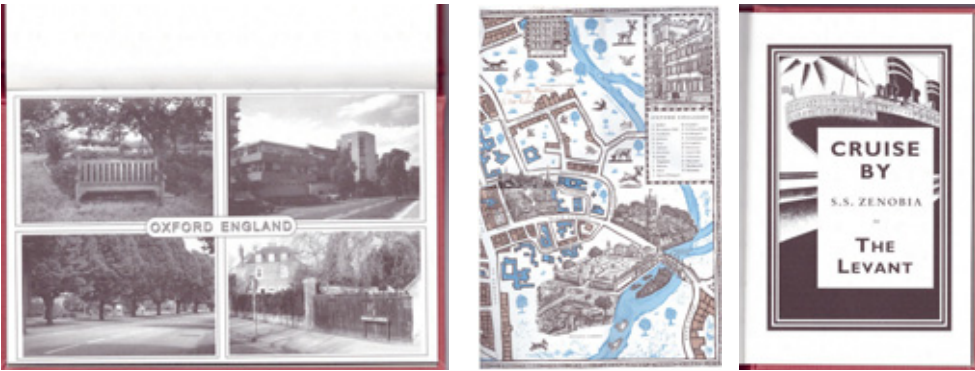


Figure 92: Postcard, map of Lyra's Oxford (partial), and cruise advert

Reading disparate objects is thematized within the narrative, partly as an alchemical practice, but it is also tied to the reading of the alethiometer. At the opening of the episode, the transmuting formation of a flock of starlings is depicted as a system-environment hybrid, staging individuation as continuous feedback:

<sup>638</sup> Philip Pullman, *Lyra's Oxford*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), np.

They didn't seem like individual birds, or even individual dots of black against the blue: it was the flock itself that was the individual. It was like a single piece of cloth, cut in a very complicated way that let it swing through itself and double over and stretch and fold in three dimensions without ever tangling, turning itself inside out and elegantly waving and crossing through and falling and rising and falling again.

"If it was saying something..." said Lyra.

"Like signaling."

"No one would know, though. No one could ever understand what it meant."

"Maybe it means nothing. It just is."

"Everything means something," Lyra said severely. "We just have to find out how to read it."<sup>639</sup>

Concluding the episode, after meeting the alchemist Sebastian Makepeace, being saved by the collective birds of Oxford and brought to awareness of the coupling between themselves and the city as a confederation of agencies, it would appear that Lyra and Pantalaimon reach an understanding of how such a particular reading unfolds. It is a reading that is likened to reading the alethiometer, where the structure of objects of meaning is mixed up with the environment and where meaning and subjectivity becomes a mutually imposed influence. Pantalaimon sums up the feedback character of the experience: "It feels as if the whole city's looking after us. So what we feel is part of the meaning, isn't it?"<sup>640</sup>

It would be perfectly valid to here read *Lyra's Oxford* as a guide to a particular form of reading, a configurative reading concomitant to the configurative aesthetics of the media ecology of William Blake. And to a certain degree, the book reads as a manifesto. However, the book, bringing together disparate objects into new and future configurations, also *performs* a configurative reading: *Lyra's Oxford* is in this sense a book to come, the environment for media-ecological sympoiesis. But it is also a narrative that reconfigures the previous books, and not merely by virtue of its heterogeneous materiality. Commenting, seemingly en passant, on a pivotal passage in *Northern Lights*, where the reader, but not the character Lyra, is informed by the character Dr. Lanselius of Lyra's prophesized role in the future battle for existence, a complete reconfiguration of one of the central tenets of that book is indicated: "Dr. Lanselius was the consul of all the witch-clans at Trollesund, in the far north. Lyra remembered her visit to his house and the secret she'd overheard – the secret which had had such momentous consequences."<sup>641</sup> In *Northern Lights* no such secret is

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<sup>639</sup> Pullman, 2003, p 5f

<sup>640</sup> Ibid., p 48

<sup>641</sup> Ibid., p 29



divulged to Lyra, at least not in the house of Dr. Lanselius. There is however a significant piece of information delivered to the reader in the passage of *Northern Lights* to which *Lyra's Oxford* refers. After showing the consul how she uses the alethiometer, Lyra is asked to go to a shed outside the house where a large number of the branches of cloud-pine the witches use for flying are kept, and to pick out which branch belongs to a particular witch. The task is part of Lyra's prophecy, and as she chooses the right one, Dr. Lanselius tells Farder Coram, who has accompanied Lyra to the house, what it means:

"The witches have talked about this child for centuries past," said the consul. "Because they live so close to the place where the veil between the worlds is thin, they hear immortal whispers from time to time, in the voices of those beings who pass between the worlds. And they have spoken of a child such as this, who has a great destiny that can only be fulfilled elsewhere – not in this world, but far beyond. Without this child, we shall all die. So the witches say. But she must fulfill this destiny in ignorance of what she is doing, because only in her ignorance can we be saved."<sup>642</sup>

Continuing on Lyra's destiny, Dr. Lanselius's discourse is brought to a halt some lines later when she suddenly returns to the house, "bearing a little branch of pine". While the focalization of the narrative brings the attention of the reader, during their conversation, from Lyra outside by the shed, who Dr. Lanselius and Farder Coram are initially watching through a window, to the relation between the two men, there is no mention, here or later in the book, of Lyra overhearing anything of what is said. It is, however, perfectly possible that she has been eavesdropping outside the door sometime before returning to the house (as it is an activity she has indulged in earlier and one that has great impact on the narrative). The passage in *Lyra's Oxford* could thus be read as offering a supplementary focalization to the scene in *Northern Lights*. This in turn would entail a reconfiguration of the narrative, where Lyra, though perhaps not privy to the specific details of her destiny, is nevertheless more informed than what is inferred from the previous books. It is a reading in line with the added stress on the participatory function of meaning production with regard to Dust and the alethiometer made in *The Subtle Knife*. By pointing to this scene in *Northern Lights* – which is also the scene where Lyra explains how she reads the alethiometer by making her mind "go clear" – it is apparent that reading the alethiometer, and the book – was already a matter of being submitted to the feedback of an ecosystem.

A similar reconfiguration of the earlier books takes place in the second post-trilogy publication pertaining to *His Dark Materials*, the novella *Once Upon a Time in*

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<sup>642</sup> Pullman, 1995, p 175

*the North* from 2008. This geographically displaced western (hence the title) narrates the first meeting between two of the most prominent characters of the trilogy, the Texan aeronaut Lee Scoresby and the armored bear Iorek Byrnison. In a similar publication format as that of *Lyra's Oxford*, the book is illustrated by engravings and comes with additional material. Participatory reading is further emphasized by the board game “Peril of the Pole”, which comes complete with rules for “four to six players and their daemons”; explicitly tying the narrative to ludological practice.<sup>643</sup> The book also contains representations of objects pertaining to the narrative, newspaper clippings, a bill of lading and a page from “The ‘Shipping World’ Yearbook”, and an apparently non-related correspondence between Lyra and her university about her Master’s thesis (Figure 93).



Figure 93: “Peril of the Pole”, game board (partial), compass and markers, and rulebook

The plot of *Once Upon a Time in the North* unfolds as a version of a popular western, lone gunman-avenger storyline, seeing Scoresby arriving at the remote Arctic island of Novy Odense, where a conflict between local authorities and different commercial mining interests is leading up to a confrontation. In the pay of one party Scoresby recognizes an old antagonist, a gunslinger and coldblooded killer from Texas. Teaming up with the armored polar bear Iorek Byrnison, Scoresby finds a creative solution to the conflict and kills his nemesis, in a western-style shoot-out, before both escape in his balloon out to sea. As a narrative the novella plays heavily on the strong friendship between Scoresby and Iorek, as portrayed in the trilogy, and it functions as a prequel to *His Dark Materials*, adding to, while at the same time relying on, the reader’s knowledge of the two. The relation between Scoresby and his Daemon Hester, which is perhaps one of the most endearing relations narrated in the trilogy, is also reprised. But what is most telling is that the narrative here presents a primal scene of sorts, staging the first time Iorek boards a balloon. Though not contradicting what is narrated in *Northern Lights* – where Scoresby offers a short anecdote from a military

<sup>643</sup> Philip Pullman, *Once Upon a Time in the North* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2008), p 98

campaign in the Tunguska area as corroboration for his ability to carry the bear and his armor in the balloon – this scene nevertheless indicates a supplementary, if not superseding, narrative.

On several levels, *Once Upon a Time in the North* relates Lee Scoresby and Iorek Byrnison with the balloon in what could be described as an assemblage of distributed agencies. Both the aeronaut and the armored bear are, in a sense, cyborg identities, whose narrative function hinges on the relation between body and technology. Bringing together man, bear and balloon, at the end of the novella, this distribution of agencies performs as a narrative unit, from which a specific perception is generated. Thus the balloon-bear-man assemblage acts as an ontogenetic medium. This function is further stressed by the board game accompanying the book, where the balloon is tied to a specific experience involving a participatory activity. Establishing the relation between armored bear, aeronaut and balloon as one of distributed agency, sympoietically generating a specific perception, puts the information about their relation given in *Northern Lights* in a new perspective. Although Scoresby here is clearly referring to a fully armored bear – while Iorek in *Once Upon a Time in the North* is merely clad in his iron helmet – the anecdote seems to imply that flying with the bear is a rare, perhaps unique, occasion: “I rescued him once from the Tartars, when he was cut off and they were starving him out – that was in the Tunguska campaign; I flew in and took him off. Sounds easy, but hell, I had to calculate the weight of that old boy by guesswork.”<sup>644</sup> (NL 228) Given the narrative of *Once Upon a Time in the North*, it would seem that the weight of Iorek, with or without armor, should not pose such a mystery as that implied by Scoresby’s statement. While not contradicting the previous narrative to the same extent as *Lyra’s Oxford*, there is still additional, and residual, information added to the narrative that invites a novel configuration.

The short story *The Collectors* offers a different approach to reconfiguration. Published as an audiobook on December 10, 2014, *The Collectors* is presented as a version of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century ghost story. The story, taking place in Will’s world (that is, for all intents and purposes, the real world) and set in the 1970s, circles around two pieces of artwork, a painting and a sculpture, representing Mrs. Coulter and her golden monkey daemon respectively. Two art collectors, Horley and Grinstead, meet at a university college late in December; retiring after dinner to Horley’s apartment, Horley displays his most recent acquisition, a strange painting of a “fair-haired young woman with the most extraordinary ambiguous expression – one moment she looks cold, disdainful, contemptuous even, and the next on fire with a sort of lost and hopeless and yet somehow very sexy yearning.”<sup>645</sup> The sculpture of the monkey

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<sup>644</sup> Pullman, 1995, p 228

<sup>645</sup> Philip Pullman, *The Collectors*, e-book edition, (London: Random House, 2015), np

is described as “horrible to look at” while at the same time “beautifully sculptured” with “every hair, every little fingernail in place, perfect.”<sup>646</sup> Grinstead goes on to profess that he once knew the subject of the painting, a Marisa van Zee, and that in fact they were lovers, although that would indicate – the painting and the sculpture being made in the early 1900s – that he is impossibly old. He then goes on to explain how he instantly recognized Marisa van Zee as a person from another world and briefly sketches the cosmology of Dust and parallel universes, pointing out that time is not necessarily consistent between worlds. A gruesome backstory accompanying the art objects is also revealed: first, that they always seem to end up together, even if not sold as a set, and second, that the owners of the set invariably suffer violent deaths. Accordingly, the host of the dinner party soon dies of an allergic reaction, possibly poisoned, and Grinstead leaves the house in possession of the painting, only to be fatally hit by a taxi in the dark and wintery street outside the house.

Rather than directly pointing to a specific passage in *His Dark Materials* as the site for reconfiguration, *The Collectors* offers a complementary generic framework for the narrative, adding to, and in a sense highlighting, the postmodernist, genre-mixing narration at work in the trilogy. The story, in its weirdly incongruent temporality and unexplained haunted objects, infuses the narrative with a tint of horror and the uncanny. The house where the story is set is vaguely reminiscent of Lord Boreal’s house from *The Subtle Knife*, and the practice of collecting arcane and occult material connects both to the Gothic and steampunk atmosphere of the trilogy and to the characters of Lord Boreal and Mrs. Coulter. It also sheds some new light on Mrs. Coulter’s life prior to the narrative of the trilogy. But what is perhaps most interesting about *The Collectors*, and most relevant to the present argument, is that it emerges as a playful engagement with an existing environment, showing how new stories can be put together from the “old tattered bits and pieces” of Pullman’s (dark) material.

Furthermore, where *Lyra’s Oxford* and *Once Upon a Time in the North* blend different modes of representation – images, texts, games, maps, book design, and so on – the audiobook format of *The Collectors* activates yet another sensorial regime. Bringing these different publications together, the distributed subjectivity of media-ecological sympoiesis becomes linked to a distributed sensorium, very much in attunement to William Blake’s notion of an ontogenetic perception. From the perspective of these post-trilogy publications, it is clear that Pullman is undermining the very system he has set up with the concluded narrative of the fantasy trilogy book format. The epic culmination of *The Amber Spyglass*, where the Authority is toppled and the Kingdom of God is replaced by The Republic of Heaven, and where Dust is given the single meaning of reified consciousness, cannot be sustained. Not only

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<sup>646</sup> Ibid., np

does the concept of Dust retain a trace of its others, as Anne-Marie Bird argues, it also becomes by this very trace of exteriority operative as an ecosystem, and herein lies its potential for political and ethical critique, a critique that Pullman brings upon the genre of fantasy, as will be discussed in the following.

### **The Republic of Heaven: ecological collective**

It is well documented that Pullman envisioned *His Dark Materials* as a subversion of the comic trajectory of the heroic and epic narrative structures particularly salient in the fantasy genre in the 1980s and 1990s. While this critique is partly directed at a subset of the fantasy genre, perhaps to a large degree represented by a strain of bestselling, popular fantasy series, narratives that could be described as derivative and formulaic, it is also a critique directed at central aspects of the influential fantasy narratives of Tolkien and Lewis. Disregarding, for the moment, Pullman's explicit critique of what he perceives as implementations of the Christian narrative in Lewis's, and to a lesser degree Tolkien's, fantasy books, it could be argued that the narrative structure of Tolkien and Lewis is still aligned with the Christian notion of Redemption. In fact, it has been argued that this structure is precisely what is proposed by Tolkien's concept of eucatastrophe, and as such, the story of the Redemption functions as a model for heroic-epic fantasy.<sup>647</sup> Rather than as a conciliatory or escapist fantasy, Pullman has adamantly claimed that *His Dark Materials* is grounded in the real world, in the sense that it is an attempt to "tell a realistic story by means of the fantastic sort of machinery of the stories", and that its realism lies in that "it is talking about human beings in a way which is vivid and truthful"<sup>648</sup>. Meaning, and truth, are not a transcendental given, Pullman argues; rather, they are something that must be lived and experienced, in connection with the physical world: "This connectedness is where meaning lies; the meaning of our lives is their

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<sup>647</sup> Burton Hatlen presents such an interpretation of Tolkien's books in Burton Hatlen, "His Dark Materials, a Challenge to Tolkien and Lewis", in *His Dark Materials Illuminated*, ed. Millcent Lenz & Carole Scott (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), p. 77f

<sup>648</sup> Philip Pullman, "Faith and Fantasy", Radio National Encounter Interview March 24, 2002. <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/encounter/faith-and-fantasy/3513418> To a certain degree, the generic hybridity of *His Dark Materials* also enforces a realist inclination to the mechanics of the fantastic, where overlapping generic frameworks constantly disrupt the immersion of the reader, while at the same time making the reader further more involved in the configuration of the narrative. Though the secondary world of *Northern Lights* is a fantasy world, it does not primarily establish itself within the generic framework of heroic-epic fantasy. Instead the secondary world is established as a slight alternation to the founding narratives of Western modernity: histories of science and religion; as did the era of European Colonialism; and mythological and folkloristic narratives have an actual and political presence. It is a strange world, whose strangeness in its reminiscence of the real world is continuously uncanny, and thereby constantly establishing itself as a configurative text.

connection with something other than ourselves.”<sup>649</sup> In Pullman’s insistence on connectedness, but also according to the media-ecological function of Dust, meaning is never a matter of submitting to the will of an authority. This is not a question of ethical or ontological relativism. The death of God does not mean that the world is bereft of meaning or morality but rather, that meaning and morality are part of living in the world. “No, if the republic of Heaven exists at all”, Pullman writes, “it exists nowhere but on this earth, in the physical universe we know, not in some gaseous realm far away.”<sup>650</sup> Against the solipsistic and escapist fantasy writings of Tolkien and Lewis, and the popular epic-heroic fantasy produced in their wake, expressing, in Pullman’s view, both by form and content, an authoritative world order, transcendental and platonic, *His Dark Materials* presents a world of multiple relations, where morality and creativity are intricately intertwined. However, presenting this world in the form of a book trilogy, where the closure of the concluding volume also explicitly thematizes closure as a plot device – it is only by closing off passages between worlds that the loss of Dust and in continuation the loss of consciousness can be stalled – would seem, as has already been pointed out, to contradict the very ecological openness innate to the concept of Dust. A notion of connectedness that comports to the ecological ethos of Dust – which is also the ethos of configurative textuality, as it has been applied in this thesis so far – is not a question of holism. Here, connectedness would seem to imply precisely the opposite, respecting, in the form of a Levinasian ethics, the exteriority and heterogeneity of relations. To be connected is in this sense to be in a relation-of-nonrelation. This is also why *His Dark Materials* does not express its critique of escapist fantasy but rather performs it. This performed critique is salient in the configurative textuality of the three books as individual ecosystems coupled to each other, but never connected as a whole, as a self-contained, in-finite narrative. This is the relation between Lyra and Will at the end of *The Amber Spyglass*, on the bench in the Botanic Garden in their respective Oxfords, separated always when the passages between worlds are closed off, never connected, forever in a relation-of-nonrelation.

Striving to articulate a certain meaning content, that is, adhering to a hermeneutical model of literature and reading, where Dust takes on the specific meaning of consciousness, it appears that *His Dark Materials* must undo the very concept it is trying to uphold. Reading the trilogy as a critique of the Christian narrative and of the solipsistic escapism of the epic-heroic genre of fantasy would then entail transforming Dust into a transcendental concept, where participation becomes limited to interpreting the will of an authority. However, as the hitherto unpublished “Book of

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<sup>649</sup> Philip Pullman, “The Republic of Heaven”, *The Horn Book Magazine*, Nov/Dec 2001, p 656

<sup>650</sup> *Ibid.*, p 661



Dust” indicates, *His Dark Materials* does not limit itself to the trilogy book format, nor does Dust function merely as a transcendental concept (though it does that too, in the form of epic closure at the end of *The Amber Spyglass*). Instead, both Dust and all the disparate media objects pertaining to *His Dark Materials* operate within the tension between interpretation and participation, between archive and ecology, delineated throughout this dissertation. And it is precisely this tension that generates new worlds and the new narratives of “The Book of Dust”.

In *His Dark Materials*, as has been pointed out by numerous critics, Pullman reads Milton through Blake as being “of the Devils party without knowing it” (E 35), thereby criticizing the consolatory fantasies of Christian fantasy (in which he perceives the epic, heroic, mythical fantasy of Tolkien as taking part). The critique consists of bringing out a non-liberal, non-modernist, media-ecological sympoiesis immanent to world-making, to ontogenesis, in the narrative function of Dust. However, it seems that Pullman’s critique also tries to enforce closure in the last book by imbuing Dust with single meaning. Dust thus becomes a plot device in an epic-heroic fantasy, and, in a sense, agreeing with the generic structures the concept is meant to overturn. That is, the narrative closure of the trilogy restricts the very sympoietic aesthetics set in motion by the concept of Dust. To some extent the epic form of fantasy overtakes the narrative: Pullman starts to read Blake through Milton, so to speak. Or rather, the fantasy trilogy format reads the epic as a concluded narrative. The Blakean sympoiesis of *His Dark Materials* is organized by the trilogy book format and by the epic-heroic fantasy genre. And here it becomes clear that the modern and print-oriented notion of narration – the modern and liberal humanist version of the fantasy epic – cannot contain the media-ecological aesthetics of the fantastic within the confines of the book. Nevertheless, Pullman’s trilogy, in a sense by failing as a book, subverts the trilogy book format, and the closure of the book. If nothing else, *Lyra’s Oxford*, *Once Upon a Time in the North* and *The Collectors* are a material testament to this subversion.

Roger Whitson and Jason Whittaker point out that the ecological function of Dust, stressing participation and connectedness, offers an alternative to the hermeneutic ideals of the literary, becoming “a powerful metaphor for understanding a literary form of production divorced from the author as single originator.”<sup>651</sup> With the concept of Dust, Pullman presents a notion of participation and cooperation which adheres to the logics of a flat ontology. Here, the anthropomorphic aspects of Pullman’s narrative align with Bennett’s notion of distributed agency and vital materialism. The critique of the Christian narrative and the epic-heroic fantasy genre delivered in *His Dark Materials* can then, Whitson and Whittaker claim, be under-

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<sup>651</sup> Whitson and Whittaker, 2013, p 167

stood as advocating a non-liberal and non-humanist political collective. It is a collective that Whitson and Whittaker find articulated in the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, in the concepts of the multitude and the commonwealth. The participatory aesthetics employed in *His Dark Materials*, where the world-building innate to the fantastic entails understanding creativity as co-production and in effect as partaking in a distributed perception, operationalizing, so to speak, Blake's cleansing of the senses, could thus indicate a possible future for non-humanist humanities: "Pullman's inclusion of Blake into a networked form of authorship associated with Dust's sense of interconnection allows us to also consider how Blake might be used to change the culture of postindustrial labor, create a common space for the digital humanities, and to attempt to envision what place – if any – literary studies has in the future of the academy."<sup>652</sup> This future, however, means not merely interpreting Dust as a transcendental concept, conforming to certain political and philosophical positions, as Whitson and Whittaker tend to do, but also adhering to how the various emanations of "The Book of Dust" affect and are affected by the reader, as well as the other media systems to which they are coupled. Here, Pullman's reconfiguration of William Blake, by the inclusion of found and non-literary objects into the aesthetic experience, could facilitate an understanding of how the fantastic is connected to the material aspects of how things make worlds mean. It would then seem, not surprisingly, that the theoretical and critical concepts for literary studies will need to account for the ecological relations of ontogenesis. This brings the discussion into the perilous realm of the political. This is also the point at which, for the first time, I must enter into this lengthy exposition, standing at Rockefeller Plaza on a chilly day in April, 2012, confronted by Lawrie's reconfiguration of Blake's Urizen, after having spent the day at the Morgan Museum and Library on Madison Avenue reading their copy of William Blake's illuminated book *Jerusalem The Emanation of The Giant Albion* (copy F, c. 1827).

## 6. Building *Golgonooza*

I had been to Rockefeller Center a couple of times earlier, visiting the city while living in upstate New York, in the small town of Endicott on the outskirts of Binghamton, where my father worked at the IBM headquarters in 1984 and 1985. The last time my family and I were in the city, before returning home to Sweden, we stayed at a hotel by Central Park, the same building where they shot the exteriors for the movie *Ghostbusters* (1984), and I remember walking down Fifth Avenue to Rockefeller Center. It was late June 1985. Now it is April 27, 2012, and I have been walking up Fifth Avenue from the Morgan Museum and Library. It is cold and windy,

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<sup>652</sup> Ibid., p 168

and I am standing at Rockefeller Plaza; people are skating at the ice rink and before me is Lee Lawrie's adaptation, in relief, of the frontispiece of *Europe, a Prophecy*. It hails me; calling me into being, I am becoming, a textual subject.<sup>653</sup> On my way up to Rockefeller Center, I have passed the New York Public Library on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, where they dismissingly referred me to the digitized version when I wished to see their copy of Blake's illuminated book *Milton a Poem* (c. 1804-1811), arguing that they "rarely retrieve the Milton", and that they "try earnestly to limit further wear upon these treasures in the care of the Rare Book Division"<sup>654</sup>. The week before I had visited the Library of Congress reading their Blake books in the Rosenwald collection. Amicably, they let me see any book I requested, and after some time the librarian responsible for the collection came to talk to me, offering assistance, inquiring about my research topic. At the Morgan Library, the Head Librarian reluctantly allows access to parts of the collection, preferring me to read the Princeton Press and Trianon Press facsimiles of Blake's books. A junior librarian supplies me with material, on the side, so to speak, without the Head Librarian's knowledge, and without due process. I am grateful for her assistance and have been thinking of a way to convey my appreciation. The following day, when I arrive in the morning at the Morgan Library, after registering with the guards and passing through the security doors that separate the reading room from the museum, I am informed that no further books, apart from the ones I am currently reading, will be supplied. The junior librarian is absent that day. I hope it's her day off. On second thoughts, maybe people are not skating; it is possible I am conflating the memory from 2012 with my visit to Rockefeller Center the year after, in March, when I am certain that the skating rink is still in operation. At that time, in 2013, I had been looking at prints from Goya's *Los Caprichos* at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and it was snowing, and I had returned to Rockefeller Center, walking down Fifth Avenue, to carry out a more thorough investigation of the site than the one I had done the previous year. Before that, it is April 27, 2012, and I am struck by the serendipity of seeing an image from Blake's work at a place where I have arrived just by chance, walking aimlessly, meandering through the city, being let out from the reading room at the Morgan Library

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<sup>653</sup> The textual meaning of Lawrie's relief was an ongoing concern to John D. Rockefeller Jr. Daniel Okrent writes: "The Lawrie piece was a headache for Junior. His problem arose, it first appeared, from his never-ending search for Meaning, from wanting to make sure the words attached to Lawrie's piece were right. Sustaining an argument with the sculptor, the architects, and Todd for well over a year, he rejected at least fifty-six iterations, ranging from Lawrie's innocuous 'Guided by Light, Heralded by Sound, Time Marches on Through the Ages', to the bizarre choice from the Book of Psalms that emerged from a meeting of the architects, 'Day unto Day Uttereth Speech and Night unto Night Sheweth Knowledge.' As each new idea for the inscription reached Junior's desk, his ill temper seemed to increase. He declared at one point that he 'would prefer to have the space for the inscription left blank rather than to have something there that [has] no real meaning,'" Okrent, 2003, p 294

<sup>654</sup> Mail conversation with Rare Book Division, New York Public Library, April 27, 2012

at closing time. It cannot be a coincidence, I think. But of course, it must be a coincidence, I think. The first time I read Blake's book *Europe, a Prophecy* was also the first time I visited the William Blake Archive. I was reading Blake to my newborn son in 2005, carrying him in a BabyBjörn strapped to my belly. He had been screaming, as newborns do, and my reading soothed him. The sound of my voice, the warmth and vibrations from my chest. We paced around in our apartment in Stockholm, in the middle of the night. I picked up a collection of Blake's poetry I had on a bookshelf. It was a used book I had bought some years earlier, focusing on the shorter works, but supplying excerpts from Blake's epics. I had bought it for a role-playing campaign I had been doing with a group of friends, in 1999, for *Mage*, a RPG White Wolf made for their World of Darkness setting. My plan had been to use Blake's poetry as a plot device, and particularly his prophecies. I had just been reading Alan Moore's and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell* (1999), where Blake plays an important part, both thematically and visually, and remembering the Swedish Gothic-horror RPG *Kult*, produced in the 1990s, to some international success, where Jim Morrison appears as an apocalyptic figure of mystical and magical powers in a Manichean war between good and evil, I thought that Blake's mythology would suit a role-playing campaign. Returning to Rockefeller Center in 2013, I joined the guided tour which takes you around the site, and not only around the Plaza but to adjacent buildings as well, focusing on the artistic decorations; here the grand narrative centers on the tension between capitalism and creativity, reading a great deal of the art – especially that which depicts working-class people – as a critique of capitalism, inserting covert, and not so covert, communist symbolism, and thus following an interpretation established by Diego Rivera's unfinished and physically absent mural. It is April 27, 2012, and I am unaware of Rivera's absent mural; and entering the former RCA building through the main entrance in order to access their free Wi-Fi to Skype my family back in Stockholm, I descend into the commercial areas below the plaza, passing José Maria Sert's mural *American Progress* (Figure 94).

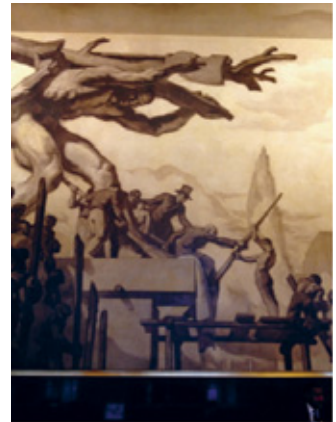


Figure 94: José Maria Sert, *American Progress* (1937)

The heroically – superheroically – exaggerated depiction of Abraham Lincoln assembling the industries and infrastructure of the nation that is already the epitome of modernity seems a fitting hyperbole for American patriarchy and consumerism, I remember thinking, somewhat uncritically. Continuing to MoMa after talking with

my family, I find myself in an exhibition on Diego Rivera, showing murals Rivera made for an exhibition eighty years earlier, as the second monographic exhibition at MoMa (the first being Henri Matisse). On April 27, 2012, the presentation of Rivera's murals, which were made portable on large blocks of concrete in order to be commercially viable, is interpolated with a historical exposé of the founding of MoMa, where a large part of the narrative is dedicated to the construction of Rockefeller Center.

The commission of Rivera and the ensuing conflict between Rivera and the Rockefeller family is comprehensively documented, exhibiting correspondence between interested parties as well as official documents from the "Rockefeller group". This is where I first learn of Rivera's mural in the RCA building. Before leaving Rockefeller Plaza, I visit the Lego Concept store, located in the northeast building on the plaza, where, after enjoying the Lego version of Lawrie's adaptation of *Urizen*, I buy a *Lego: X-wing* and a *Lego: The Mines of Moria* for my son.



Figure 95: William Blake, *Jerusalem The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, Copy E, Object 3 (1821)

In the introduction to *Jerusalem*, the book I had been reading at the Morgan Library, in what is presented as "To the Public" (Figure 95), a page that is marred by the removal of parts of the text, not merely by coloring over the print, as Blake often did, but a removal from the copper plate itself, the reader is informed that the author of the book, in striving to release the work from the bondage of bound verse, has "produced a variety in every line", but that, nevertheless:

Every word and  
 every letter is studied and put into its fit place: the  
 terrific numbers are reserved for the terrific parts  
 the mild & gentle, for the mild & gentle parts. and  
 the prosaic, for inferior parts; all are necessary to  
 each other. Poetry Fetter'd. Fetters the Human Race.  
 Nations are Destroy'd, or Flourish, in proportion as Their  
 Poetry Painting and Music, are Destroy'd or Flourish! The  
 Primeval State of Man, was Wisdom, Art, and Science. (E 146)

W. J. T. Mitchell describes *Jerusalem*, which is Blake's most comprehensive illuminated book, consisting of 100 plates, as a "comic encyclopedic anatomy": "not as an imitation of an action but as an encyclopedic anatomy of the world in which exemplary actions, descriptions, and personae are drawn from the realms of myth, epic, and romance rather (as is generally the case with anatomies) from the low mimetic world."<sup>655</sup> In a sense, it could be argued that *Jerusalem* maps a media ecology of the fantastic, and while it narrates the generation of Blake's utopian, secondary world – the Jerusalem foreshadowed in the Preface to *Milton a Poem*, which is the basis for Parry's famous hymn – this is not done in the form of an epic narrative, nor as a temporal extension and manifest trajectory, but as a participatory medium. *Jerusalem*, perhaps to a higher degree than most of Blake's other illuminated books, functions as an ecosystem, both internally, within narrative segments and individual plates, and externally, in relation to Blake's other work, and to a cultural and historical context. Building *Golgonooza* – which is the mythical city of poetic imagination and creativity that is both a city and a universe, but that also, transgressing scales and proportions, encompasses the minute particulars of the individual bodies of the living and operates as a schema of the fourfold participatory perception of ontogenesis – engages the coupling of ecosystems. And as I have pointed out repeatedly in this dissertation, this in turn enacts a tension between system and environment, and a tension between the operationally closed closure of a strict autopoietic system and the operationally ajar closure of a sympoietic system. An operationally closed system, self-generating and self-organizing without relation to exteriority, is what in Blake's terms amounts to the reasoning and comparing rationality of selfhood, which is perhaps a necessary component of building systems, but which it is equally necessary to oppose. However, it is important to remember that such an opposition is not simply a matter of a dichotomous and exclusive relation, as pointed out earlier. Just as the causality and temporality of a perception-event hinges on the paradoxical openness of cybernetic closure, and is reconfigured retroactively, creating systems is nevertheless a question of configuring a specific organization.<sup>656</sup> While no system can be completely encompassed by another, there is also no position outside from which to construct a system. That is why Los's intention, of creating a system of his own is doomed to failure, no matter how adamantly he insists and how passionately he wails:

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<sup>655</sup> Mitchell, 1978, p 174

<sup>656</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell refers to these peculiar causalities, forcing the reader to configure the narrative of *Jerusalem* as "spiritual causes", Ibid., p 183f



And this is the manner of the Sons of Albion in their strength  
 They take the Two Contraries which are calld Qualities, with which  
 Every Substance is clothed, they name them Good & Evil  
 From them they make an Abstract, which is a Negation  
 Not only of the Substance from which it is derived  
 A murderer of its own Body: but also a murderer  
 Of every Divine Member it is the Reasoning Power  
 An Abstract objecting power, that Negatives every thing  
 This is the Spectre of Man: the Holy Reasoning Power  
 And in its Holiness is closed the Abomination of Desolation  
 Therefore Los stands in London building Golgonooza  
 Compelling his Spectre to labours mighty: trembling in fear  
 The Spectre weeps, but Los unmovd by tears or threats remains  
 I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans  
 I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create  
 So Los, in fury & strength: in indignation & burning wrath  
 Shuddring the Spectre howls. his howlings terrify the night  
 He stamps around the Anvil, beating blows of stern despair  
 He curses Heaven & Earth, Day & Night & Sun & Moon  
 He curses Forest Spring & River, Desart & sandy Waste  
 Cities & Nations, Families & Peoples, Tongues & Laws  
 Driven to desperation by Los's terrors & threatening fears (E 152f)

However much he labors at the furnaces, and however much he tortures and harrows his Spectre, there is no escape for Los; the two are forever structurally coupled, and while this infinite temporality is retroactively configured, it is also this fact that opens up for new couplings and new creative energies. This short excerpt from Plate 10 indicates how the shifting relations between narrative positions and perspectives function as an ecosystem, where the paratactic structure of the text enables a relation-of-nonrelation between discrete units, and where each individual unit, by an operation that can be described as braiding, following Groensteen, can seemingly form any number of individual systems. In the following plate of *Jerusalem*, Plate 11, the relation between system and individual is explicitly thematized (Figure 96).

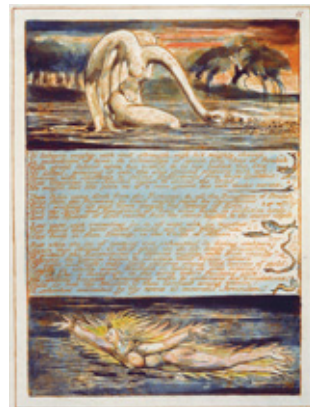


Figure 96: Jerusalem The Emanation of the Giant Albion, Copy E, Object 11 (c. 1821)

Plate 11 enacts yet another scene of generation where the children of Los, who will embattle the children of Albion later in the book – though the nature of contrariness and war in Blake’s books is, as I, and numerous others, have pointed out, not easily accommodated to a binary logic – emerge from the surroundings of techno-nature assemblages. Pouring molten metal into the ground, Los molds his offspring from the environment.

To labours mighty, with vast strength with his mighty chains.  
In pulsations of time, & extensions of space. like Urns of Beulah  
With great labour upon his anvils, & in his ladles the Ore  
He lifted, pouring it into the clay ground prepar’s with art;  
Striving with Systems to deliver Individuals from those Systems:  
That whenever any Spectre began to devour the Dead,  
He might feel the pain as if a man gnawd his own tender nerves (E 154)

It is clear here that individuation in Blake’s work is a matter of ecological emergence. The systems that Los creates, the fourfold subjectivities of Golgonooza, are system-environment hybrids, operationally ajar, organizing and being organized by the environment to which they are coupled. This is how the ratio of the senses is affected by and affects the creation of worlds, and this is how imagination operates, as that peculiar interplay of experiences alluded to by McLuhan, discussed earlier in this chapter. But where McLuhan’s notion of imagination as something that exists before being “outered” in technological systems clearly runs the risk of situating imagination and creativity within a higher and transcendent realm of existence, prior to a fall into the material world, I – from the media ecology of William Blake – would rather suggest that it is precisely the materiality of the technological system that is the fulcrum here. Imagination emerges in the tension between archive and ecology, by the coupling of ecosystems operating by the machinic phylum, whether natural or cultural, organic or technological. These couplings, as we saw in the discussion on the configurative textuality of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, are the living metals cast into the expanse and taking the form of books, dragons and men. This is also the Dust of distributed consciousness and the hybrid bodies of the underworld. And this is the Barbelith of a parasitic infection lingering within the organisms of the living. If we have never been modern, we have definitely always been other. This is how William Blake – and the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic with him – challenges and subverts the liberal humanist notion of autonomy, individuality and subjectivity.

In his informative discussion on the relation between Blake’s aesthetics and politics, and Blake’s relation to the hegemonic political radicalism of the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century – personified by persons such as Tom Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft – Saree

Makdisi argues that liberal, humanist concepts of individuality and freedom cannot be applied when trying to understand Blake's aesthetics. Modern, liberal and humanist epistemology must be set aside.<sup>657</sup> Blake's notion of freedom is not based on a self-regulating subject; instead, Blake's understanding of individual freedom is grounded, argues Makdisi, in an understanding of individuation and subjectivity as a situated process, which in capitalist society to a large extent amounts to a mode of production. "Thus, freedom for Blake meant something altogether different from the liberty of the hegemonic form of liberal-radicalism: freedom here involves a liberation from formation into individuality, not the freedom associated with a life of individuality."<sup>658</sup> William Blake's political project – which has, from a variety of positions, been understood as anti-imperialist and anti-authoritarian, whether the argument is grounded, as E. P. Thomson holds, in Blake's close affinities to an antinomian tradition, or in the political struggles of the era after the French Revolution, as David Erdman claims – cannot be conceived, argues Makdisi, as restricted to a political or a social dimension. It is not merely the freedom of the self-regulating, liberal individual within a social system of oppression that is at stake here, it is also the freedom from self-regulation.<sup>659</sup> Once again, the vortex functions as a hypericon with which to conceptualize this movement of relations. It is the very organization of systems as a political and hegemonic process that is traced in Blake's work, and this formation of systems cuts across all levels of distinction, where the organization of the individual body is on the same scale as that of cities, societies and universes. This is how the perception-event of the embodied aesthetic experience of reading one of Blake's illuminated books creates a world. It is not a question of what these books mean but, as I have argued, what they do.

Makdisi argues that the heterogeneity of Blake's work, what I have discussed as the sympoietic and configurative textuality of media-ecological aesthetics, can be understood against the function of individuation as process and relation, as a collective network, removing the individuality of selfhood, immanently merging with, while at the same time retaining, the particularity of objects in relation:

For modern and postmodern readers, this is undoubtedly the most difficult concept we encounter in Blake. His understanding of freedom, the freedom offered by our being in

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<sup>657</sup> "Readings of the prophecies that rely upon the modern epistemological and political paradigms and conventions which were being heralded by the hegemonic radicals of Blake's own time – and challenged by Blake – may offer plenty of meaning and plenty of valid observations; but I believe that they will have only a loose and tentative grasp on the urgent cultural and political project that these works embody.", Makdisi, 2003, p 41

<sup>658</sup> *Ibid.*, p 106

<sup>659</sup> E. P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), David Erdman, *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969)

common, is an infinite capacity for particularity – not *individuality*, which for Blake is a form of confinement and limitation, but *particularity*, always becoming anew, tracing and retracing different trajectories of actualization, existing in and as and through *striving*, but at the same time mixing in and with and through others, allowing our own striving to be affirmed and strengthened by the striving of others with and through whom we immanently participate in being.<sup>660</sup>

If this immanent participation “in being” is difficult to conceptualize from a modernist or postmodernist point of view, it seems well aligned with the ecological and cybernetic conceptualization of participation that I have delineated throughout this dissertation. Makdisi’s argument, though not explicitly ecological, posthumanist or even non-humanist, nevertheless offers an understanding of the challenges a media-ecological aesthetics such as Blake’s poses to liberal humanist concepts, even before such concepts had become hegemonic in Western culture, at the very dawn of modernity.

Participating in the production of meaning at Rockefeller Center was clearly pre-figured in accordance with a modern, and liberal humanist conceptualization of the individual, of the individual as a self-organizing, self-generating and self-providing consumer of culture, commodities and public goods. This is for whom the theme of “New Frontiers” is envisioned. This is the subject hailed by Lawrie’s adaptation. And this is the political subject for whom Urizen’s division of the sensible above the entrance to the former RCA building is to function as a stable ground. However, as Blake’s diagnosis at the birth of modernity has indicated, this is not how systems engender individuals. In addition to the archontic intentions of the “Rockefeller group”, implementing architecture as monumental archive, I would argue that Rockefeller Center also emerges as an ecosystem. Thus, while Diego Rivera’s insertion of an image of Lenin at the heart of this site could be read as being in opposition to the Rockefeller family as one of the premier representatives of modern capitalism, such a reading, stressing Rivera’s art as an act of critique and resistance, would nevertheless agree with a liberal and humanist understanding of subjectivity. Perhaps, instead, it could be argued, to some extent at least, and disregarding here the revolutionary and participatory aesthetics of the Mexican Mural, that Rivera’s unfinished and destroyed mural “Man at the Crossroads” is a participatory and revolutionary medium – in accordance with the function of Blake’s vortex – only by its destruction. As a secret in the wall, haunting the buildings of Rockefeller Center, Rivera’s mural opens up the site to the sympoiesis of configurative textuality. This is a critique that entails, as has been pointed out throughout this chapter, an ecological understanding of subjectiv-

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<sup>660</sup> Makdisi, 2003, p 320



comics; and it should come as no surprise, though he is difficult to unlock, that Tom Bombadil appears as a hidden feature in *LEGO the Lord of the Rings* (2012), the LEGO game version of the movie trilogy. If the liquid metals and unnamed forms of creative imagination once took the shape of men and books in the sixth chamber of Blake's printing house in Hell, who is to say what shapes and materials future structural couplings will engender. A good guess, however, is that they will involve "members never before seen".

Figure 98: Adaptation of Lee Lawrie's *Wisdom*,  
LEGO Concept Store, Rockefeller Plaza





## Conclusion:

# Ecologies of the Imagination

*Sympoiesis* is a simple word; it means ‘making-with.’ Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing. In the words of the Inupiat computer ‘world game,’ earthlings are *never alone*. That is the radical implication of sympoiesis. Sympoiesis is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for wordling-with, in company. Sympoiesis enfolds autopoiesis and generatively unfurls and extends it.<sup>663</sup>

Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble, Making Kin in the Cthulucene* (2016)

I have argued that the aesthetics of the fantastic in Western cultural history needs to be conceived of as a media history and not as a literary history or a history of film or art, or even games for that matter. If our goal is to understand the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic, if we want to investigate the diverse ramifications – cultural, ethical, social – of what I have called the media ecological sympoiesis of the fantastic, it is necessary to readjust, and perhaps even at times to abandon, the set of critical tools with which literary scholarship has been conducted over the past century or so. I have claimed that the modernist, hermeneutical notion of literature needs to be reformulated, in order to properly assess the cultural status of the fantastic. While attempts at such reformulations have been made, as has been discussed, on the one hand from the field of cultural studies and media studies – addressing popular culture and mass culture – and on the other hand, from a literary study of the modernist and postmodernist avant-garde, these reformulations of the modernist, hermeneutical notion of literature have not approached the aesthetics of the fantastic as such. If literary studies have touched upon the fantastic, it has been conceptualized – following Todorov’s study – as a subversive artistic mode whose main effect is the estrangement and disruption of discursive systems, by way of epistemological ambiguity, while cultural and media studies generally eschew the question of aesthetics altogether.

In the following, I will conclude my argument by recapitulating some of the more salient ecological reconfigurations proposed in this dissertation, briefly sketching how a media-ecological understanding of the fantastic also applies to the literature produced within what Gumbrecht has called the hermeneutic field of the modern world. I would like to suggest that an ecological reformulation of the function of genre, media and text could supplement a hermeneutical approach to the literary.

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<sup>663</sup> Haraway, 2016, p 58

This does not mean that I would like to see literary study abandoning hermeneutical concepts altogether. Rather, I hope that it would by now be clear that my purpose is to delineate an ecological sensitivity within hermeneutics, as it is operative, I have argued, in Todorov's definition of the fantastic. The final section of this concluding argument will then to some extent address the question of why a reformulation of the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic is important, and necessary. This is at heart an ethical and political question. Returning here, at the end of the argument, to Donna Haraway's concept of sympoiesis, I will argue, following Haraway, against her reluctance to include H. P. Lovecraft's mythology in her concept of *Chthulucene*. In fact, in light of the environmental ontogenesis of the fantastic, I would like to suggest that it is precisely the horrific and truly unsavory aspects of Lovecraft's amoral mythopoiesis that we need to address and incorporate if we are to assess a possible ethos for the non-humanist and non-anthropocentric becoming-with that Haraway prophesizes for a compost-human world.

### **A genre is an ecosystem**

At the center of my proposed reformulation of modern literary concepts lies one simple fact: literary genres are ecosystems. This is not to say that a literary genre, which in the present argument amounts to a media system – as hopefully should be clear by now – is a system that is always open to structural couplings, or that it is even a system where couplings are internally prolific. It is perfectly conceivable that there exist and have existed literary genres that are, in the sense of Hansen and Clarke's neocybernetic analysis, best described as strictly autopoietic systems, whose relations to other systems function only as an organizing structure.<sup>664</sup> In fact, it is this relation between systems that, from Derrida's theory of the archive, I have described as archontic. But, just as Hansen notes, while operationally closed systems do (very probably) exist, self-generating and self-regulating the environment from which they emerge, the temporal extension of such systems is most definitely very limited. In this sense, a genre with a formal set of criteria regulating its organization could persist for a limited amount of time, and in relation to a specific cultural context – as when, for example, Attebery argues that the fantasy genre in the late 1970s and early 1980s functioned as a formula. However, when the relations of the actual physical objects embodying these formulas are investigated more closely, even a limited perseverance of a strictly autopoietic system often seems to be contested. That is why contemporary genre theory and, to be frank, a large part of non-contemporary

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<sup>664</sup> Maturana and Varela describe this relation as a relation between an autopoietic system and an allopoietic system, where allopoietic systems are not autonomous, do not have individuality and "are necessary subordinated to the production of something different than themselves". Maturana and Varela, 1973, p 80

theories of genre as well, such as Northrop Frye's immensely influential *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), argue that literary genres are dynamic systems. And that is why Todorov draws the distinction, based on a critique of but at the same time highly influenced by Frye's *Anatomy*, between historical and theoretical genres, claiming – in an exquisite formulation – that genres “are precisely those relay-points by which the work assumes a relation with the universe of literature.”<sup>665</sup> However, what needs to be done in order to properly describe how these dynamic relay-points operate is precisely what I have been arguing throughout this thesis: namely, a readjustment of the critical and theoretical apparatus by which literary study is performed. If concepts and systems are ecological, in the neocybernetic understanding of ecosystems that I have delineated in my argument, this applies not only to a megatextual level of generic systems but also – if I can cite Blake here – to the “minute particulars” of the aesthetic experience. As soon as concepts that do not attest to the ecological character of systemic closure are employed in the study of aesthetic experience, that is, concepts that I have been describing as modern, liberal, and humanist concepts, these dynamic relay-points within the universe of literature are all the more difficult to comprehend. This does not mean that I am claiming that all works of literature strive to operate by this dynamic relation. This is still first and foremost an argument that applies to the aesthetics of the fantastic, but it is also quite evident, it seems to me, that the ecological definition of the perception-event of ontogenesis could be applied to creative expressions in a much broader sense than merely that of the fantastic. While this could be, and in fact often is, perceived as a weakness in a critical concept, that it loses its analytical distinction – and by extension, its justification – in relation to the amount of discrete objects it could be applied to, it should also be noted that such objections fail to appreciate the radical dynamism of the operationally ajar closure of an ecological system. It is not a question of abandoning the critical concepts of modern, enlightened humanism altogether; rather, it is necessary to acknowledge that these concepts were already ecological from the very beginning. Thus the notions of autonomy and individuality, together with singularity and originality, as well as concomitant poetical and narratological distinctions, are still viable concepts; however, their function must be reassessed. If this sounds very much like a poststructural or deconstructive critique of enlightenment and modernity, that should come as no surprise, as many of the arguments put forward here stem from that critical environment; but it should also be clear that, following Cary Wolfe, Donna Haraway, Jane Bennett, Brian Massumi, amongst others, I believe that the ecological and sympoietic aspects of deconstruction can be, and in fact need to be, further incorporated in critical practice.

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<sup>665</sup> Todorov, 1975, p 8

## The Media Ecology of the Fantastic

The three main chapters of this thesis have mapped and theorized three distinct media ecologies: the media ecology of J. R. R. Tolkien's secondary world Middle-earth; the media ecology of the superhero comic book *Miracleman*; and the media ecology of William Blake. While mapping these ecologies, it has been argued that the presentation of the supernatural and unreal, the presentation of worlds that do not exist in this world, hinges upon a participatory reader, emerging in an ontogenetic perception-event of distributed agency that I have defined as media-ecological sympoiesis. I have argued that sympoiesis in these three ecosystems cuts across levels and domains, and that the emergence of participation can be discerned within discrete segments of narration and representation – such as comic book spreads, imagetexts, books and narrative scenes and segments – but that it also entails feedback loops within systems of a different order, such as juridical systems, fandom, and technologies of production and distribution. Mapping these three ecosystems, I have indicated a distribution of affect and agency within discrete objects, each potentially functioning as ecological media systems. In this sense, I have argued that mapping the media ecology of Middle-earth and the media ecology of *Miracleman* helps us understand how the genres of fantasy and American superhero comics function as ecosystems, evolving over time, affecting and being affected by the environments and systems to which they are coupled. This is how genres are participatory systems, following Derrida, and this is also how a genre can be both singular and general – namely, as an ecosystem.

It could be objected that the ecosystems I have mapped do not significantly differ from a traditional study of the historical reception or of the cultural context of a literary work or an author – what I am claiming to be a distribution of agencies in an ecology of participatory media is in fact no different from how much literary research has been discussing intertextuality and historical and social influences for the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And I agree, up to a point. As I have repeatedly indicated, there are clear affinities between a media-ecological method of research and traditional, modernist and hermeneutical, literary research. However, as I also have indicated, there are also decisive differences. And these are all the more important. It is these differences that force us to reassess humanist concepts of literary study, down to its minute particulars. Mapping media ecologies is a matter of movement, over time and space. Thus the three media ecologies I have mapped in this thesis are in a sense limited to the three chapters in which the mapping is done. They are configured, temporally and spatially, by the argument of this dissertation. This is partly the reason for the iterative and meandering style that at times, perhaps, has been an annoyance to the reader. To this extent, mapping media ecologies is a matter of doing, and not merely describing a meaning content; it is an immanent activ-

ity, and not merely transcendent. But it should also be clear, I hope, that the three main chapters of this thesis are interrelated, in many different ways, not only by being juxtaposed here. Thus it has already been indicated that William Blake's aesthetic practice participates in both the fantasy genre, by way of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, and in the American comic book superhero genre, by way of Grant Morrison's *The Invisibles* (as ecosystems). And while the distributed agency and creativity of Tolkien's secondary world is influenced by Blake, in several different ways – through Blake's mythic method for instance, as well as by William Morris and the Victorian fantasy genre strongly influenced by the pre-Raphaelites responsible for the canonization of Blake – it is also the case that the contemporary adaptations and transformations of Blake's work are affected by Tolkien's version of secondary creation. Likewise, the superhero genre maps in both the direction of Tolkien's fantasy genre and toward the composite art of William Blake. These relations cannot, however, be written in the form of a coherent narrative or a sequence of connections; instead, in order to incorporate the heterogeneity of the remainder – the secret in the wall, so to speak – they must remain *unwritten* and should rather be conceptualized precisely as relations, where each individual object retains, if not its individuality, then its particularity as a relation-of-nonrelation. Here, the schema of the different emanations of Urizen presented in Blake's book *Milton a Poem* can provide a visual indication of this relation (Figure 99). It is in this sense that the three main chapters of this thesis can be described as three distinct ecologies of the imagination, offering three distinct configurations of world, while at the same time taking part in the media ecology of the fantastic.



Figure 99: William Blake, Milton a Poem, Copy D, Object 36 (printed 1818)

**The material ambiguity of the fantastic**

In the three main chapters of this thesis, as well as in the discussion of *The Unwritten* in Chapter 1, focus has been on the material ambiguities of the aesthetic object. I have argued that the perception-event of ontogenesis involves embodied participation, in which systems and environments are operationally ajar. It is by the operationally ajar closure of a sympoietic system that structural coupling can engender new organizations. This is how worlds come into being. And as the aesthetics of the fantastic is an aesthetics of becoming, of ontogenesis, it operationalizes sympoietic

systems. The fantastic object is in this sense a quasi-object, a thing in movement and a thing with agency, magically disrupting any clear and oppositional distinction between nature and culture, form and content, meaning and presence. It is an object in which heterogeneity emerges, as Massumi points out, as a relation-of-nonrelation. Accordingly, the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic, within the ecological framework that I am proposing here, functions by emergent heterogeneity. To this extent, it is clear that the three main chapters, as well as the discussion of *The Unwritten* in Chapter 1, focuses on objects in which the emergence of material ambiguity is particularly salient. It is the material ambiguity of William Blake's illuminated book that to a large degree affects – and is affected by – the adaptations discussed in Chapter 4. And the comic book form discussed in Chapter 3 exemplifies heterogeneity on many different levels, material, epistemological, legal, historical.

In Chapter 2 it was argued that Tolkien's work functions as an ontogenetic system in large part because it consists of many different materialities. It was noted that the perceptions generated by the media ecology of Middle-earth were not only grounded in what has traditionally been considered as literary practice. And to this extent, the books of J. R. R. Tolkien are not literature, as Burton Raffel notes. But it was also argued that while the genre of fantasy and the cultural and historical context in which Tolkien's books participate function as ecosystems, this ecological practice is also operative on a textual level. This does not mean, however, that an individual text – an individual work of literature – needs to be articulated in an explicit relation to a set of other material agencies in order to function as an ecosystem. I do not claim that an ecological literature is reserved for particularly heterogenous genres or media. It is not the intention of this dissertation to draw a line between a literature that is materially ambiguous, and one that is not. Rather, I would claim that material ambiguity is an emergent property, and something that also characterizes the literary fantastic that is the focus of Todorov's investigation.

Concluding his argument Todorov notes that the work of Franz Kafka synthesizes “the supernatural with literature as such” and claims that by this “Kafka affords us a better understanding of literature itself.” Todorov continues: “We have already evoked literature's paradoxical status a number of times: it lives only by what ordinary language calls, for its part, contradictions. Literature embraces the antithesis between the verbal and the transverbal, between the real and the unreal.”<sup>666</sup> Although Todorov here clearly sees modern literature – or the literature of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century at least – as characterized by this paradoxical status and is certainly aware of that there exist literatures that do not operate by the same, he has a point. Literature does not represent reality, and if it ever did, it does not do so in the work of Kafka, and it could

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<sup>666</sup> Todorov, 1975, p 175





Figure 100: Mike Carey, Peter Gross, *The Unwritten 8*

certainly be argued that a shift away from this representative function has always been a part of modern and postmodern literature. But neither does literature represent itself. What literature has become – and what it of course already was – is an ontogenetic medium. It creates a world. This is what Kafka teaches us.<sup>667</sup>

### **The ecological imagination: enter the *Cthulhucene***

“A building is a membrane”, says Brian Massumi.<sup>668</sup> In the story arc “Orpheus in the underworld”, collected in *The Unwritten 8*, Pullman (that is, the character in the narrative, not the author discussed in Chapter 4, although the link between the two is intentional)<sup>669</sup> – in the guise of Lucifer, frozen from the waist down in Lake Cocytus – confronts Tommy Taylor with a last temptation. From the top of the world’s tallest building, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, Pullman offers a final vision for an enlightened humanity (Figure 100). It is a vision in two parts. First it is a hypothetical projection of a possible future, a political utopia in which humanity has cast off the mythologies of old, and entered a world of its own creation. It is a world without superstition, without the frivolous past-times of fairy-tale and fantasy, it is a world for grown ups, as Pullman says. Second, it is a utopia that rests on a purified sense of vi-

<sup>667</sup> This is also, at least partly, the point made by Deleuze and Guattari in their book on Kafka, in which they sketch the rhizomatic assemblage of Kafka’s literary machine in a way that comes close to a media ecological mapping. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Franz Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p 29ff. I would like to thank Jakob Lien for pointing this out to me.

<sup>668</sup> Massumi, 2002, p 203

<sup>669</sup> Interview with Allison Hallett, published in the online blog, *The Portland Mercury*: <http://www.portlandmercury.com/BlogtownPDX/archives/2010/01/07/an-qanda-with-the-unwrittens-mike-carey>

sion. Liberated from the residual noise (and dust!) of an imposing environment, the sense of vision offered from atop the Burj Khalifa burns to the core of things; seeing past the distractions of storytelling, it is a vision that reveals the hidden meaning of existence.

This liberated sense of perception, autonomized and producing the single vision of Newton's sleep, as Blake would have it, is what the Marxist-critical tradition of literary theory sees as the subversive potential of the fantastic. Thus, Rosemary Jackson and Kathryn Hume, but also Todorov, to the extent that the notion of estrangement is essential to his definition of the fantastic, argue, as we saw in Chapter 1, that stories of the fantastic offer an alternative position from which to reevaluate and criticize consensus reality. Although this position is conceptualized as being located in the periphery, or in the interstitial spaces between objects and images, it is nevertheless a position that indicates the possibility of a separation from the world. And while this is arguably the function that a narrative has as a momentary configuration of an organizing structure in which a distinct perception emerges, it is also the case that any such organization – from the ecological framework proposed throughout my argument – is always already in the process of new structural couplings. As Mark Bould argues, the always-already of hegemonic interpellation takes the form of a feedback loop that sidesteps and reconfigures causality. Thus, there is no definitive distinction to be made between the real and the unreal, or between the medium and the world, or for that matter, between culture and commodity. They are all processes of ontogenesis. There is no position outside from which to observe the world, its exteriority is already a part of the system of observation.

We have seen how this position of autonomous vision has been thematized and problematized throughout the argument, where technologies of observation have stressed the distributed agency of ecological feedback. This is what happens to Frodo at Amon Hen, not that he succeeds in liberating himself as an autonomous individual in the act of removing the Ring from his finger, but rather that the sympoietic emergence of this act indicates the immanent participation in being that characterizes the – to the modern and postmodern sensibility, according to Makdisi – paradoxical notion of ecological freedom. Removing the Ring does not mean liberating himself from the incessant murmurs and voices of an intruding environment; it merely reorganizes the distribution of agencies in the form of a system-environment hybrid. Likewise, Sauron's Eye in the tower – whose cinematic representation in Peter Jackson's films is a veritable carnival of synesthesia – is not to be read as a representation of the evils of a liberal, humanist subjectivity implementing colonial dominion. Instead Sauron's Eye, like Miraclemann's benign dictatorship as well as Urizen's and Pullman's notions of a transcendental autonomy, is to be understood as a failure to acknowledge the full ramifications of a neocybernetic causality. This is the mark of

evil; not grasping that the sympoiesis of structural coupling will always-already be a part of living organisms, whether these are animate or inanimate. And this is also the eventual undoing of evil: thermal death, stasis, entropy.<sup>670</sup> If not, as in the case with Sauron's Ring, the distributed agency of subjectivity finds a new structural coupling in which vital energies are reconfigured. It is of course the fact that Sauron never was an autonomous subject to begin with that has already led to the undoing of the Lord of Rings; the Eye in the Ring undoes the Eye in the Tower, so to speak.

It is March 12, 2013, and as I enter the RCA building from the entrance on 50<sup>th</sup> street and take the elevators to the observation deck on the 70<sup>th</sup> floor – to the “Top of the Rock” as is its official, and trademarked, denomination – I am enfolded by the structure of the building. Perhaps the experience is not comparable to Frodo's at Amon Hen, but in a very real and tangible way my senses here, on top of the world, in a matter, are entangled in an environmental process of emergent perception. I am, also a building. And while the trace of Diego Rivera's mural lingers as a reminder and remainder of future structural couplings, it is nevertheless the case that this building is first and foremost a commercial building, erected to maximize office space. And to this extent, Rockefeller Center, just as Urizen's hailing at the Plaza, marks the tension between creativity and commodification that according to McLuhan characterizes modern literature. A building is a membrane.

Donna Haraway's concept of sympoiesis has been instrumental in writing this dissertation. That is probably quite evident by now. Although initially presented by Beth Dempster in 1998, as Haraway acknowledges in her book on sympoiesis, and as I point out in Chapter 1, it was through Haraway that I first got into contact with sympoiesis and it was through her that the concept began to inform my argument. First contact was on October 30, 2012, at approximately 4 pm, in the Grand Auditorium at Uppsala University. Donna Haraway held a lecture that consisted of two unpublished papers: “Playing String Figures with Companion Species: Staying with the Trouble” and “Sowing Worlds: a Seed Bag for Terraforming with Earth Others”, both of which were later collected, in revised form, in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. After the lecture I got hold of pdf-versions of both papers, and they have stayed with me since.

In *Staying with the Trouble* Haraway proposes the concept of “Chthulucene” as an alterative to the ever more disseminated “Anthropocene”. The Anthropocene, says

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<sup>670</sup> Writing this last section in the locker room of my local gym, cooling off after taking a long sauna, I come to think of Foucault's notion of heterotopia. Foucault claims, in his essay “Other Spaces” that the Scandinavian sauna (he should say Nordic, since it is more a Finnish tradition than a Scandinavian one, but anyway) is a heterotopia, a place for emergent reorganizations of being. And of course he is correct. But one must also remember that the sauna does not respect the self-organizing of the human organism, and eventually it will undo its energies. Sympoiesis is not a humanism. Michel Foucault, “Other Spaces”, trans. Jay Miskowiec, in *Diacritics*, Vol. 16, No. 1. (Spring 1986), p 26

Haraway, risks giving in to defeatism, surrendering to the fact that the end of the world – or at least the world of humanism – has already happened, and as such there is no need to abandon anthropocentric worldviews.<sup>671</sup> The Chthulucene on the other hand, acknowledges that there never was a time when the human was not entangled in the environment, and perhaps, Haraway suggests, it is not the world that is ending but merely the reign of human exceptionalism: “What if the doleful doings of the Anthropocene and the unworldlings of the Capitalocene are the last gasps of the sky gods, not guarantors of the finished future, game over? It matters which thoughts think thoughts. We must think!”<sup>672</sup>

Of course, I believe Haraway is correct – it matters which matters do the thinking. But precisely for this reason I also find it interesting that she explicitly excludes H. P. Lovecraft’s alien-horror-god Cthulhu from the genealogy of the term. In her argument she is careful to note that her Chthulucene differs from Lovecraft’s Cthulhu, and not only as a linguistic circumstance. Haraway writes:

Maybe, but only maybe, and only with intense commitment and collaborative work and play with other terrans, flourishing for rich multispecies assemblages that include people will be possible. I am calling all this the Chthulucene – past, present, and to come. These real and possible time-spaces are not named after SF writer H. P. Lovecraft’s misogynist racial-nightmare monster Cthulhu (note spelling difference), but rather after the diverse earthwide tentacular powers and forces and collected things with names like Naga, Gaia, Tangaroa (burst from water-full Papa), Terra, Haniyasu-hime, Spider Woman, Pachama-ma, Oya, Gorgo, Raven, A’akuluujjusi, and many many more.<sup>673</sup>

In Haraway’s Chthulucene the deities and supernatural creatures of myth and folklore are proper to “a vein of SF that Lovecraft could not have imagined or embraced – namely the webs of speculative fabulation, speculative feminism, science fiction, and scientific fact.”<sup>674</sup> One of the critters with which Haraway thinks the Chthulucene is a spider living in the part of North Central California where she herself lives. It is called *Primoa cthulhu*, named after Lovecraft’s ancient god. Renaming the spider *Primoa cthulu*, Haraway adapts it to her conceptual framework, while at the same time erasing the conceptual world in which the spider first emerged.<sup>675</sup> It could be argued that the motive for this violent act is claiming a more natural nature, one in which

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<sup>671</sup> Haraway, 2016, p 49, p 56

<sup>672</sup> Ibid., p 57

<sup>673</sup> Ibid., p 101

<sup>674</sup> Ibid., p 101

<sup>675</sup> Ibid., p 31

the horrors of Cthulhu, and the racist and misogynist aspects of Lovecraft's work, are unthinkable.<sup>676</sup> But it could also be the case that Haraway here makes another point, namely that the ongoingness of ecosystems is as much about cessation as it is about generation. The sympoiesis of structural coupling is operationally ajar, and as such adaptation could always mean generating an alien self-organizing structure. To this extent, Haraway excludes Lovecraft's monsters precisely because it is only then that Cthulhu – dead but dreaming in sunken R'Lyeh – will truly be a reminder of the finitude of the living. Sympoiesis is not a humanism; ontogenesis means participation in multiple directions, where the individual is environmental and emergent, but also vulnerable to monsters and subject to new emergent feedback loops of alien individuation. Acknowledging this aspect of the Chthulucene, acknowledging that ontogenetic ecosystems are also always potentially the *Cthulhucene* (note spelling difference), in which the human, as much as the spider, can become a thought to think with, could very likely be what the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic teaches us. A book is also a membrane.

And here, like Los kneeling before the vibrant globe of blood that is of himself and is the embryonic form of Enitharmon to come (Figure 101), it is never quite clear where the structural couplings between the ecosystems of my becoming end, and – if you, dear reader, pardon this final and much belated attempt at metalepsis – yours begin.

This is the ecological imagination. Enter the *Cthulhucene*.

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<sup>676</sup> Timothy Morton's argues that Haraway's conceptualizations of nature-cultures could be interpreted as proposing a more essential notion of nature. Morton, 2007, p 21



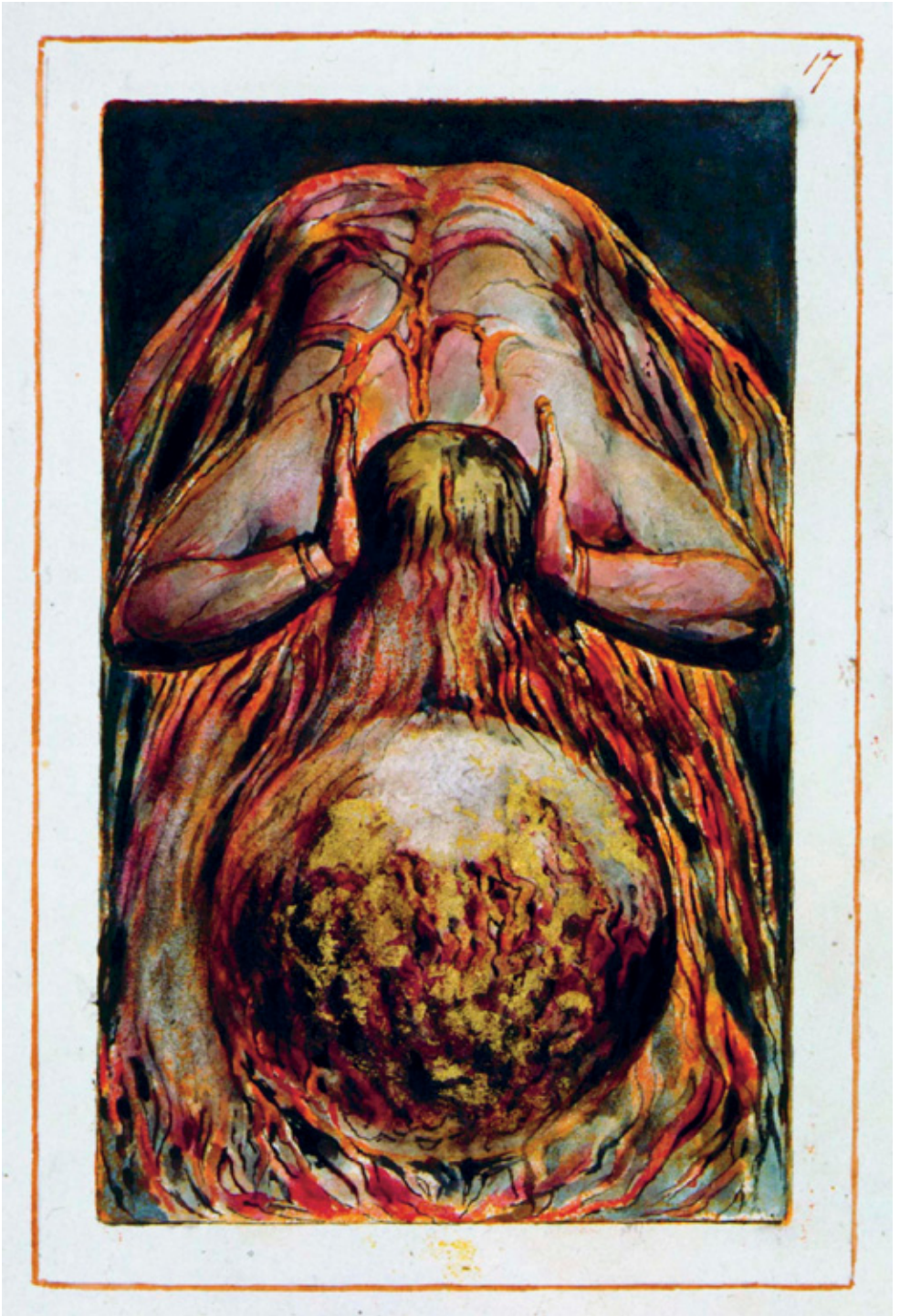


Figure 101: William Blake, *The First Book of Urizen* (1794), Copy G, Object 17



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## Sammanfattning på svenska

Föreliggande avhandling argumenterar för en medieekologisk modell för att teoretisera fantastikens deltagarestetik. Med stöd i befintliga analyser av litterär och populärlitterär fantastik – där i synnerhet Tzvetan Todorovs bok *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1973, franskt original 1970) utgör en central text – påvisas att fantastiken är en estetik som betonar affekt och deltagande. Todorov menar att fantastik ska förstås som en sorts mellanläge – fantastiken är en mellangener, säger han. När en övernaturlig händelse presenteras i en litterär text är två förklaringar möjliga. Antingen är denna händelse möjlig inom den värld som texten bygger upp, och vi har då att göra med en genre där andra naturlagar råder, en genre som Todorov benämner ”det övernaturliga”. Eller så är händelsen i själva verket inte alls övernaturlig, utan bara verkade vara så, till följd av ett missförstånd eller ett sinnligt bedrägeri. Vi befinner oss då i genren ”det kusliga”. Det är i denna osäkerhet som det fantastiska utspelas, mellan två förklaringsmodeller, mellan två genrer. Vidare menar Todorov att även om denna osäkerhet ibland kan gestaltas i texten, genom någon av dess figurer, så är den framför allt något som den implicite läsaren upplever. Den fantastiska texten enligt Todorov är alltså något som sker när en läsare tvekar mellan två modeller för att förklara en övernaturlig händelse. Fantastik förutsätter en deltagande läsart: “The fantastic therefore implies an integration of the reader into the world of the characters; that world is defined by the reader’s own ambiguous perception of the events narrated”, skriver Todorov.

Där Todorov’s modell för fantastik bygger på en hermeneutisk modell för tolkning och på så vis förutskickar fantastikens kärna som en epistemologisk osäkerhet och en i grunden hermeneutisk tvetydighet, där deltagande förankras i den implicite läsaren, är syftet med föreliggande avhandling att påvisa hur fantastikens centrala osäkerhet och tvetydighet också kan och bör förstås som materiell och ontologisk. Avhandlingens argumentation tar såtillvida fasta på att Todorov insisterar på läsarens delaktighet. Även om Todorov alltså i slutändan förankrar delaktighet i den implicite läsaren, är det likväl som ett affektivt tillstånd det fantastiska framträder. Och denna affekt kommer till uttryck, menar Todorov som en tvetydig perception, genom att läsaren integreras i fiktionens värld, blir till del av fiktionen som perception. Medan Todorov emellertid hävdar att denna deltagande perception sker genom hermeneutisk appropriering, är huvudpoängen med avhandlingens argumentation att den är förkroppsligad och materiell. För att beskriva denna kroppslighet använder avhandlingen det neocybernetiska begreppet sympoiesis. Begreppet sympoiesis lanserades av Donna Haraway som en sorts korrelat till det systemteoretiska begreppet autopoiesis, för att betona hur blivande enligt henne alltid är en

fråga om samtillblivelse. Blivande, tänker sig Haraway är en händelse som alltid är situerad, i någon mån avhängig en miljö eller en omgivning, och alltså i denna mening ekologisk. Sympoiesis måste förstås i relation till autopoiesis. Autopoiesis är en cybernetisk teori för hur organismer organiseras genom feedback med en omgivning. Det är en teori som lanseras i vad som brukar beskrivas som cybernetikens andra fas, i början av 1970-talet, av två biologer – Francisco Varela och Humberto Maturana. Ett autopoietiskt system – vilket då skulle inkludera den mänskliga organismen, liksom alla levande celler – utverkar, hos Varela och Maturana, en mycket udda form av autonomi, som ofta har missförstått. Samtidigt som ett autopoietiskt system ska förstås som ett cybernetiskt system, där alltså relationen mellan system och omgivning hela tiden regleras genom återkoppling, är det också ett system som är självreglerande och självgenererande. Ett autopoietiskt system är operationellt slutet, dess självreglering sluter sig mot omgivningen, samtidigt som systemet genom denna slutenhet också återkopplar till samma omgivning. Det är precis denna motsägelse eller paradox i det autopoietiska systemet som sympoiesis betonar: att det på samma gång är slutet och öppet. Det är också denna motsägelse som kan användas, med stöd i neocybernetisk teori, för att förstå hur en viss typ av estetisk erfarenhet framträder i form av en händelse, där det estetiska objektet framträder eller tillkommer i en distribuerad subjektivitet. Föreliggande avhandling argumenterar att det är denna ekologiska subjektivitet som aktiveras av fantastikens världsblivande. Fantastiken karaktäriseras såtillvida av medieekologisk sympoiesis. Det är detta som utgör fantasins ekologier.

Kapitel 1 utreder de teoretiska perspektiven i avhandlingen. Materiell-kulturell miljö för denna utredning utgörs av den tecknade serien *The Unwritten*, av Mike Carey och Peter Gross. Med stöd i posthumanistiska teorier om förkroppsligande, i neocybernetisk teori, affektteori och nymaterialistisk teori skisseras en modell för att teoretisera estetiskt deltagande. Donna Haraways begrepp sympoiesis används sedan för att beskriva hur estetisk erfarenhet och subjektivitet organiseras som ekosystem.

Utifrån *The Unwritten* poängteras hur denna ekologiska subjektivitet kan användas för att beskriva hur medier, genrer och texter fungerar inom fantastiken. Begreppet medieekologi presenteras, där ett ekologiskt mediebegrepp blir operativt för att beskriva hur mediasystem fungerar som infrastrukturer för världsblivande. Medieekologier karaktäriseras härvidlag av ontogenes.

En genomgång av relevanta teorier för fantastik, huvudsakligen litterär och populärlitterär fantastik, påvisar sedan hur en medieekologisk modell kan användas för att beskriva fantastiken som en ontogenetisk genre: fantastiken skapar världar genom ekologisk återkoppling mellan system och miljö, där även läsaren görs delaktig i ett ekosystem. Avslutningsvis framläggs argument för att en viss typ av texter fungerar som deltagande ekosystem. Exempel på dessa texttyper ges: konfigurativa

texter, arkontiska texter, metaleptiska texter och ekfrastiska texter. Fantastiken utmärks av att den operationaliserar detta slags deltagande texter. Fantastiken som deltagarestetik utmärks såtillvida av medieekologisk sympoiesis.

Kapitel 2 undersöker J. R. R. Tolkiens verk som en medieekologi. Genom kartläggning av en mängd olika objekt synliggörs hur medieekologisk sympoiesis är verksam på flera nivåer inom denna medieekologi. Deltagande blir här centralt för att förstå såväl Tolkiens verk som text, som för att förstå betydelsen av Tolkiens verk inom fantasygenren. Adaptioner av Tolkiens verk undersöks, såväl officiella adaptioner postumt publicerade av Tolkien's förläggare, huvudsakligen i redaktion av Christopher Tolkien, som mindre officiella adaptioner, som filmer, parodier, spel och fan-fiction. Denna undersökning kontrasteras läsningar av enskilda texter och narrativa segment i Tolkiens verk där en medieekologisk sympoiesis aktualiseras i skapandet av sekundärvärlden Middle-earth.

Kapitel 3 undersöker den tecknade serien *Miracleman*. Genom att analysera hur *Miracleman* som enskild titel historiskt har sammankopplats med en stor mängd olika system för tillblivelse, tecknas deltagande som distribuerad agens. Denna distribuerade agens aktiveras i etablerandet av fiktionsvärlden som perceptionshändelse, såväl i form av den enskilda serietidningens läspraktik, som i form av superhjälteserien som mediasystem. Den amerikanska superhjälteserien som system för världsblivande beskrivs som en medieekologi i vilken självreglering och självgenerering sker genom återkoppling. Superhjälteserien blir såtillvida ett system som framträder tillsammans med en omgivning, och som därvidlag skapar och reglerar denna omgivning, samtidigt som samma omgivning skapar och reglerar systemet. Denna medieekologiska modell används inom superhjälteserien som en kreativ estetik, såväl som en kommersiell strategi.

Kapitel 4 behandlar William Blakes estetik. Utifrån ett antal adaptioner av William Blakes verk analyseras hur William Blakes sammansatta konst, huvudsakligen i form av den illuminerade boken, fungerar genom ekologisk sympoiesis. Blakes verk avkräver deltagande, på ett konceptuellt plan, såväl som materiellt och kroppsligt. Den illuminerade bokens system för sammankoppling fungerar här som ett ekosystem, och förutsätter deltagande i form av en perceptionshändelse. Denna deltagande perception förankras i fantastikens kulturhistoria, genom Blakes adaptioner av Dante, liksom i en samtida kulturmiljö, genom ett antal samtida adaptioner av William Blake.

Avslutningsvis sammanfattas avhandlingen. Den medieekologiska modell som presenterats genom avhandlingen förankras också explicit i en kritik av den västerländska modernitetens autonomibegrepp. Fantastikens deltagarestetik framhålls här som ett system för att tänka estetisk erfarenhet som förkroppsligad och materiell, det vill säga, som ekologisk.

