

A VISUAL COUNTERPOINT TO THE ALICE BOOKS

Maggie Taylor's *Through the Looking-Glass*ⁱ

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Visiting Verona on my holiday in 2009, I more or less incidentally found myself in an exhibition of the work of Maggie Taylor. This surely was a surprise: I really liked her work, but also it appeared that part of the works were inspired by *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Back home I discovered *Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, illustrated by Maggie Taylor*. Soon after I bought one of her works in a gallery in Munich ("And who has won?") that never stops fascinating me.

In 2015 I retired as director general of the KB, the National Library of The Netherlands. It is a KB tradition that a portrait is made of retired directors, and a pen drawing or painting of them hangs in a central corridor. I wanted something different and sent an email to Maggie Taylor, asking her whether she would be willing to make a portrait of me. Her answer came almost directly: unfortunately she did not have the time to do this, because she was working on *Through the Looking-Glass*. Moreover, she did not portrait people who are still alive. Since this was quite convincing, I found another visual artist, but I could hardly wait for the publication of her illustrations of *Through the Looking-Glass*.

And now it's here: *Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There, illustrated by Maggie Taylor*, published by Moth House Press.

In this article I will describe my impressions of this publication.

Who is Maggie Taylor?

Maggie Taylor graduated in philosophy and, following her main interest, later also in photography. After a number of years she began to use the computer to create her images.

In her own words: "Although I was trained as a photographer, using film and chemistry, I was an early practitioner of digital imaging. Since 1996 I have been experimenting with the scanner as a camera, and also using other small digital cameras and cell phones to collect the bits and pieces in my work."ⁱⁱ

Maggie calls herself an imagemaker, not a photographer. Her prints incorporate photographic elements, but also scanned illustrations, sculpture and artefacts. "I do not start with sketches or preconceived ideas for the images. Instead, I begin with scans of the daguerreotypes and tintypes that I collect, and let them gradually evolve into the finished images. Hundreds of layers and adjustments are involved in each image, and they can take a month or more to create."

She avoids photographing people, but she has found a reliable cast of characters in the old photographs that she collects and scans in her computer. They show characters of

varying age and in varying circumstances, implying a history and a context, while preserving their secretsⁱⁱⁱ.

There is an aspect of surrealism in her images, in line with a tradition of photographic surrealism^{iv}. We see strange creatures, half human, half animal, animals wearing human clothes, things floating in space, lit by impossible light. They trigger the subconscious, freeing the viewers from the constraints of the rational world. "I wish for the viewer to experience a convergence of factual memory and fictional daydream, similar to my own dialogue in creating the work".^v

Maggie lives in the United States; her work has been exhibited in one-person exhibitions throughout the US and in Europe.

Through the Looking-Glass

I asked Maggie Taylor what triggered or motivated her in the Alice books to illustrate them.

"Due to the fact that I often included daguerreotype and tintype portraits in my work, and rabbits and other animals, someone suggested that an *Alice in Wonderland* theme was present. I had not considered that, but in 2005 I started a small series of Alice images. At first there were only nine images, but the more I read and reread the book, the more characters I wanted to illustrate. Eventually the series grew to be 45 images accompanying the original text."

As a result her version of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was published in 2008.

"As I worked on the first series, I also read *Through the Looking-Glass* and was surprised at the co-mingling of the two stories in most *Alice* films. I knew the Disney film from my own childhood, and had seen a number of early 20th century versions of the books over the years. It was important to me to produce a second body of work for the sequel, but I knew it would take time. In fact it ended up taking 10 years. There are 64 images in *Through the Looking-Glass*, corresponding with the number of squares on the chess board."^{vi}

And again, just as in *Alice in Wonderland*, her style appears to be remarkably suitable for illustrating the *Alice* books: the Victorian atmosphere, the strange creatures, the unreal, the dream illusion. "Although I am very familiar with the original illustrations, I do not feel compelled to follow them exactly in my interpretations. Many times a close reading of the text leads me in a different direction."

Maggie Taylor's images have a strong autobiographical aspect. "I believe in making work from my personal experience, from my own memories and dreams, from my psyche"^{vii}. Inspiration often comes from childhood memories and impressions, or a half remembered dream.

"At times when I wake up in the morning I write my dreams in a bedside notebook. Every once in a while a dream migrates from this notebook to the computer in the form of an image. But the images rarely reflect the dream accurately. Somehow 'dream logic' and 'image logic' operate differently."^{viii} So the dream is just a beginning for her images.

The use of old daguerreotype portraits in her compositions creates a Victorian atmosphere. But there are more references to history to be found. For instance, one of the images, called "Looking-glass house" is based on Lacock Abbey, the home of William Henry Fox Talbot who is the inventor of the photographic process using paper negatives. This reference returns in the image "Let's pretend", of which Maggie Taylor remarks: "It includes a photograph I took of the oriel window at Lacock Abbey in England. This exact window is the subject of one of the very first extant photographs. It was important to me to include a few references to art history and photographic history in the work."

In *Through the Looking-Glass* as well as in *Alice in Wonderland* it is a striking difference from other illustrators of the *Alice* books that Maggie casts numerous individuals into the role of Alice, not just little girls, but also teenagers. We therefore see Alice in constantly changing roles.

Maggie herself has said that she had the intention to represent this Alice as Everywoman. The combination of images present Alice as a complex, multi-faceted personality, not a one-dimensional character. This is in line with the fact that the *Alice* books do not describe Alice's character per se, nor her looks. Although many illustrators stay remarkably close to Tenniel's illustrations, different interpretations are possible, and consequently can be found varying from Disney to manga. However, more than others Maggie Taylor's Alice confronts us with the profound question puzzling Alice: "Who am I?"

And just like Alice finds herself constantly in different circumstances with inexplicable creatures, Maggie Taylor's images let us face the same confusion.

Inversion themes occur throughout all Carroll's literary writing, but the story of *Through the Looking-Glass* is a story of complete reversal of the real world. When Alice passes through the mirror, she enters an alternative world, which reverses accepted patterns. This theme, which may be summarised by the word "Contrariwise" or "looking at things from a contrasting point of view", is reflected in several of Maggie's images.

She herself gives two examples. "The Alice on the front cover of the book is the same girl as on the back cover, but on the front she is in the 'real' world and on the back she is in Looking-glass world. And the images 'Now' and 'Later' illustrate time moving backwards for the White Queen. They are classic looking still-life images, but by placing the one with dead flowers and a dead bird before the one with the fresh bouquet of flowers, I am making my own connection to the story."

There is more. The Looking-Glass house, already mentioned above, is also pictured "as she described it afterwards", i.e. after crossing the mirror. This causes Alice to cry out: "Oh, it's too bad! I never saw such a house for getting in the way!"

The dream aspect of the story is emphasised by two images, corresponding with Alice's remark at the end of the story: "Now, Kitty, let's consider who it was that dreamed it all (...), it must have been either me or the Red King". The first image is "I was part of his dream", picturing the Red King's dream; the second one "He was part of my dream," picturing Alice's dream.

A final striking aspect: more than any other illustrator I know, Maggie Taylor illustrates the poems in *Through the Looking-Glass*. These images show details that certainly urge us to reread these poems ourselves. A beautiful example is "First, the fish must be caught", referring to the riddle cited by the White Queen at the dinner in chapter Nine.

The image “The Feast” depicts the context for this dinner and is a clear illustration of the complexity of the images, illustrating how the final version of her images can sometimes take up to several months to finish.

A parallel between Lewis Carroll and Maggie Taylor

As noticed by Thomas W. Southall in his epilogue to Maggie’s version of *Through the Looking-Glass*, her images present “a visual parallel to Carroll’s literary methods”. The images are not just an illustration, “they are derived from the text but also have a life and imaginative power of their own”.^{ix}

This becomes clearer when we look at the part nonsense plays in the *Alice* books. As has been remarked by Jacqueline Flescher^x, Carroll undermines reality by the fantasy of coined words. Reality remains implicit behind every manifestation of nonsense and is never explicitly represented. Thus a paradox is created between language and reference, order and disorder. This paradox represents not as much a tension as an incongruity. And here we can see a parallel with Maggie Taylor’s images creating an incongruity between image and reality. She makes use of photography, but the way she does this creates an unreal world. This world, like Carroll’s nonsense, has its own logic, its own rules, but there is no one-to-one reference to the real world. Nonsense in this sense is the key to Carroll’s humour, just as the incongruity between image and reality is essential to Maggie Taylor’s illustrations.

One of the fascinating aspects of the *Alice* books is that they trigger the reader’s fantasy: you can read them over and over again and get drawn into details, posing questions that every reader can answer for him/herself.

This is what Maggie Taylor does, improvising on Carroll’s text and bringing in new peripheral objects. Although there is a familiar aspect to these objects, the combinations she introduces create an incongruity and invite the reader to reflect on these combinations and solve the puzzle they present. This is a different process for each viewer: she explicitly leaves the interpretations of her images to the viewer.

As Lewis Carroll stated: “Words mean more than we mean to express when we use them; so a whole book ought to mean a great deal more than the writer meant”.^{xi}

Maggie’s images have been characterised as “obviously symbolic, but not symbolically obvious”.^{xii} She has created them from a personal background, but they represent so much more. It is a most enjoyable undertaking to find this out for yourself, as is the case with Lewis Carroll’s work.

In more than one way her images present a perfect match with the *Alice* books. I am quite sure Lewis Carroll would have liked them.

References

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- ⁱ The term “visual counterpoint” is taken from Thomas W. Southall’s epilogue in the publication reviewed here, *Lewis Carroll’s Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There, illustrated by Maggie Taylor*, Moth House Press, 2018, p. 171.
- ⁱⁱ Unless indicated otherwise, the citations are from an email exchange between Maggie Taylor and myself.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Standen, Amy (2005). *Maggie Taylor’s Landscape of Dreams*. Berkeley: Adobe Press, p.17
- ^{iv} Norman Holland in *Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, illustrated by Maggie Taylor*, Palo Alto: Modernbook Editions, 2008, p.6.
- ^v Standen (2005), p.17.
- ^{vi} The images, including the ones mentioned in this article, can be found at <http://maggietaylor.com/work/ttlg>.
- ^{vii} Standen (2005), p.7
- ^{viii} Standen (2005), p.132,133
- ^{ix} Thomas W. Southall in *Lewis Carroll’s Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, p.171, 174.
- ^x Flesher, Jacqueline (1969). ‘The Language of Nonsense in Alice’. *Yale French Studies*, No. 43, pp.128-144.
- ^{xi} Gardner, Martin (1973). *The Annotated Snark*. Penguin Books, p.22.
- ^{xii} Standen (2005), p.7.