

A VISUAL COUNTERPOINT TO THE ALICE BOOKSⁱ

Bas Savenije

bsavenije@live.nl

Published in: Lewis Carroll Review, The Reviewing Journal of the Lewis Carroll Society, Issue 57, July 2019, pp.8-11.

Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There.

Illustrated by Maggie Taylor

Moth House Press, 2018

Hardback, \$ 95

ISBN 978-0-9995325-0-8

ISBN Limited edition 978-0-9995325-1-5

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. Maggie calls herself an imagemaker, not a photographer. Her prints incorporate photographic elements, but also scanned illustrations, sculpture and artefacts. She does not start with sketches or preconceived ideas for the images, but with scans of daguerreotypes and tintypes that 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.

There is an aspect of surrealism in her images, in line with a tradition of photographic surrealismⁱⁱ. 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.

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

What triggered or motivated her in the Alice books to illustrate them? ⁱⁱⁱ

'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. Eventually the series grew to be 45 images accompanying the original text.' 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*. 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.^{iv}

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.

Maggie Taylor's images have a strong autobiographical aspect. Inspiration often comes from childhood memories and impressions, or a half remembered dream.

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' with the oriel window at Lacock Abbey.

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. The combination of images presents Alice as a complex, multi-faceted personality, not a one-dimensional character. More than others Maggie Taylor's Alice confronts us with the profound question puzzling Alice: 'Who am I?'

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. This theme 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.'

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 parallel between Lewis Carroll and Maggie Taylor

As noticed by Thomas W. Southall in his epilogue, 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'.^v

This becomes clearer when we look at the part nonsense plays in the *Alice* books. As has been remarked by Jacqueline Flescher^{vi}, 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'.^{vii}

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.

Bas Savenije graduated in philosophy in 1977. Since then, he has held a range of positions at Utrecht University, among which university librarian. From June 2009 until January 2015 he was Director General of the KB, National Library of the Netherlands. Presently, he is the chairman of the Dutch Lewis Carroll Society (www.lewiscarrollgenootschap.nl).

References

ⁱ The term 'visual counterpoint' is taken from Thomas W. Southall's epilogue in the publication reviewed here, p. 171.

ⁱⁱ Norman Holland in *Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, illustrated by Maggie Taylor*, Palo Alto: Modernbook Editions, 2008, p.6.

ⁱⁱⁱ The citations are from an email exchange between Maggie Taylor and the author of the review.

^{iv} The images can also be found at <http://maggietaylor.com/work/ttlg>.

^v Thomas W. Southall in *Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, p.171, 174.

^{vi} Flesher, Jacqueline (1969). 'The Language of Nonsense in Alice'. *Yale French Studies*, No. 43, pp.128-144.

^{vii} Gardner, Martin (1973). *The Annotated Snark*. Penguin Books, p.22.