"Jabberwocky" and Transmediation

Anna Kérchy

A potential reason of the timeless appeal of Lewis Carroll's Alice books is their adaptogenic potential that allows for the expansion of the familiarly defamiliarised storyworld across a variety of different media platforms. The reasons of this hyperadaptogenicity are manifold, ranging from the scarce verbal description of Alice's look, the memorable impact of John Tenniel's original illustration to the 1865 *Alice in Wonderland* and the 1872 *Through the Looking-Glass* editions, and the memetically reproducible iconic markers of Carroll's fantastic universe. The carefully coordinated image-textual play between verbal and visual nonsense, and the resulting metamedial self-reflectivity of the books resonate well with the postmodern narratological agenda aimed at a strategic destabilisation of meanings, and the challenging the regimes of truth.

As Alice's opening question ("And what is the use of a book without pictures or conversations?") famously suggests, Carroll designed his novels from the very beginning as picturebooks. He illustrated the initial manuscript of *Alice's Adventures Underground* with rudimentary sketches, but dissatisfied with his amateur art, eventually commissioned Tenniel, the celebrated cartoonist of *Punch* humour magazine, to reinvent the Wonderland and Looking- Glass realm in a visual form. By virtue of the author's and the illustrator's collaboration, the unique book experience is grounded in the intermedial dialogue of text and image which alternately complement, challenge, and contradict one another to enhance the nonsensical effect on linguistic and pictorial planes.

The illustrations often augment the nonsensical nature of the wordplay involved in the trademark Carrollian neologisms (as in the case of chimeric nonsensical creatures like the slithy toves who are something like badgers,

lizards, and corkscrews). Elsewhere, the narrative showcases the limits of verbal representation by pointing out of the text towards the image ("If you don't know what a Gryphon is, take a look at the picture.") Due to Carroll's cunning book design, the book also becomes an object the reader can actually play, with while she is actively involved in the making of the story. (The reader must turn the page to make Alice cross to the other side of the Looking-Glass, or to make the Cheshire Cat disappear leaving only its grin behind. These moving images allow the plotline to fast forward, move on, and lend the novel a proto-cinematic quality.)

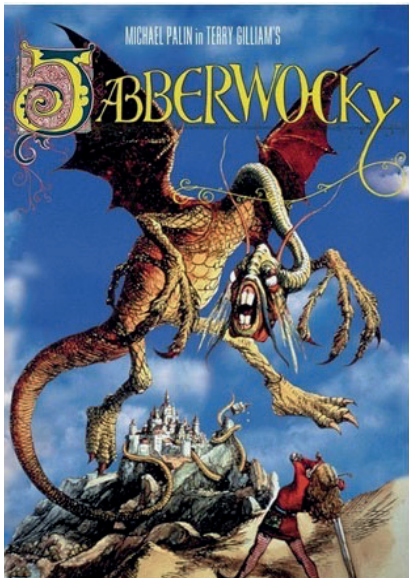
Tenniel's illustration of the monstrous Jabberwock is an exciting case of intersemiotic translation. His hybrid composite of a variety of fantastic and real beasts – rodent, reptile, insect, dinosaur, dragon, and the Lambton Worm dressed in a chequered waistcoat – is a spectacular visual embodiment of the trademark Carrollian language game, the portmanteau that fuses multiple words into one unprecedented neologism. The image offers a response to the impossible challenge of visually translating the unspeakable. Moreover, the illustration also functions as a metapicture: because of its similarity to Tenniel's depiction of Alice (portrayed from the back, in striped stockings, with flowing hair) the figure of the beamish boy knight fighting the mythical beast lends itself to be interpreted as the implied reader who must struggle with textual monstrosity on trying to make sense of nonsense. (The Jabberwock is never met in person, it is a textual creature, a part of the magical dreamrealm's private mythology, who poses an interpretive challenge to Alice and all readers.) The intermedial dynamics is strategically exploited here as a ludic engine of the text: Alice first meets "The Jabberwocky" poem in mirror writing, and misreads it as an image instead of a verbal utterance. (Her contemporary readers likely fell in the same trap, especially because the printing technology used was the one employed for the reproduction of images.)

Carroll made a conscious use of transmediation and transmedia storytelling defined by Henry Jenkins as the extension of a canonical fictional universe beyond the pages of the print and paper book towards a wide variety of media – from movie to ballet, puppetplay, computer games, and fanart – with each adaptation entering into an intermedial conversation with one another, while reiterating, revising, challenging, and enhancing the source text and each other alike, in complex ways. Throughout multiple manoeuvres of remediation, original and revisions, old analogue and new digital media forms can coexist with one another with the agenda to increase audience participation and enrich the entertainment experience. Carroll did not only create a sequel to his first novel in *Through the Looking-Glass* and an abbreviated, orally enhanced edition with colour illustration for pre-readers in *Nursery Alice*, but he also wrote non-fictional addendums to his

fairy-tale fantasy, "Puzzles from Wonderland" published in *Aunt Judy's Magazine* and a paratextual commentary on "Alice on Stage." Moreover, as a genuine art director, he also supervised the expansion of his storyworld throughout its multiple reeditions, stage adaptation and musicalisation, and even took an active part in the design of tie-in merchandise as Wonderland-themed biscuit tins and parasol handles, via promotional tactics we would refer today as transmedia commodification.

Carroll, a Renaissance man interested in the combination of traditional artforms with nascent new technologies also strategically inoculated a variety of other media forms within his literary text. Aware of the appeal of multimediality integrated within the polyphonic, kaleidoscopic novelistic form, his Alice books are enhanced by vivid visual impressions, photographic metaphors, spatial-architectural dimensions, kinetic and tactile vibrations, a proto-cinematic quality, the performativity of the Christmas pantomime, and even musical potentialities nested in the spectacular, sonoric, sensual poetics of nonsensical language use.

The figure of the monstrous Jabberwock has pervaded popular culture in an endless sequence of creative revisions on the silver screen, often inspired by Tenniel's visual representation of this mythical beast. Abundant examples range from the stovepipe-nosed, fuzzy orange haired dragon-like creature dressed in a single green glove and a bright yellow waistcoat eventually cut out from Disney's 1951 animation adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland* (but included in Disney's Little Golden Book storybook series) to the genuinely grotesque reconstruction of Tenniel's beast with bulging eyes, protruding teeth, and a scaly waistcoat in SyFy channel's recent 2009 televised serial reimagining of *Alice*.



In the 1977 fantasy comedy movie *Jabberwocky*, directed by Monty Python's Terry Gilliam, the film poster features a color replica of Tenniel's illustration accompanied by the humorous taglines: "Jabberwocky: the monster the monsters are frightened of!", "So horrible that people caught the plague to avoid it!", "Makes King Kong look like an ape!" In a faux-medieval setting, a farcical pastiche of the Dark Ages, young peasant Dennis is assigned the mission, against his will, to slay the horrendous monster that threatens the kingdom of Bruno the Questionable. After many slapstick-comedy-like misfortunes and scatological farce – like

Dennis on the run disguised in a nun's habit or entering the castle through the sewerage system – the dimwitted antihero kills the dragon and gains the fairy-tale happy ending by mere accident. The film's tone is an exciting combination of the absurd and the melancholic. In a mock existential philosophical conclusion, the Jabberwock (a giant winged puppet moved by a man walking backwards to reach an uncanny effect) represents both an obstacle and a key to unreachable happiness.

In Tim Burton's 2010 computer-animated, live-action family fantasy film *Alice in Wonderland* written by Linda Woolverton and released by the Walt Disney Company the Jabberwock embodies the arch-enemy as the monstrous pet and fatal weapon of the Red Queen's totalitarian regime Alice must defeat with the mythical Vorpal Sword to save Underland. During a verbal increase of filmic tension, the Jabberwock is much talked about before it eventually appears on the screen to stage one of the highlights of the film's stunning 3D CGI visual effects. Alas, its initial hybridity is reduced to the monstrosity of a fairy-tale dragon, yet the idea of implied reader Alice becoming the knight who slays the beast resonates with the 1872 edition's original metafictional concept in which the Jabberwock embodies the confusions of meanings the interpreter must struggle with on trying to make sense of nonsense. Moreover, the technologically sophisticated hyperrealistic visualization of what has never been, a mimetic simulation of the fantastic, offers an intermedial, intersemiotic translation of Carroll's defamiliarised discourse ("it sounds like language but there is something wrong with it") into a defamiliarised visual imagery ("it looks like reality but there is something wrong with it").

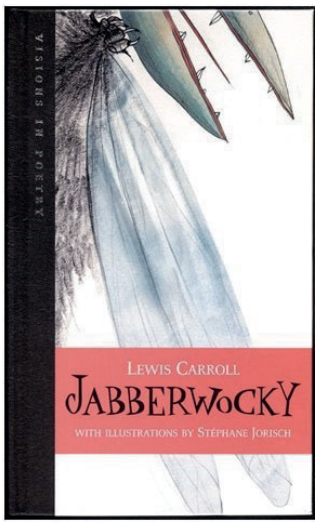
Legendary Czech puppeteer Jan Svankmajer's 1971 stop motion animation fantasy short film *Jabberwocky* is loosely based on Carroll's famous nonsense poem and a children's book *Anička skřítek a Slaměný Hubert* by Vítězslav Nezval. The film embraces a surrealistic dream imagery: children's imaginative agency is celebrated as toys gain a life of their own, objects tease and threaten with their tactile appeal (the short film begins with snapshots of a child's buttocks spanked), and a single pencil-line struggles to break free from a child's maze drawn on toy blocks.

We listen to the voice-over narration of the "Jabberwocky" poem as a wardrobe is running through a forest (dead wood moving about live trees, confusing present and past, reality and potentiality) before it opens up to reveal a strange playroom inside. The Jabberwock preserves its enigmatic unimaginability, as it never shows up in the film, but there are no actual human characters either. A boy's sailor suit escapes the wardrobe to dance around by itself, we witness phantom flashes of the ghostly apparition of a playing little girl, dolls disintegrating and gobbling each other up, a black cat knocking over pieces of a puzzle game, and the photo of an old man in the end defaced by the line that manages to break out from the maze. The playroom overgrown by branches that sprout, bloom, and bring fruit, and the line's escape out of the window into the forest might represent the triumph of nonsense over sense, of the proliferation of meanings over the absence of signification. The cacophonic music also enhances the nonsensical effects of this brilliant little filmic fantasy.

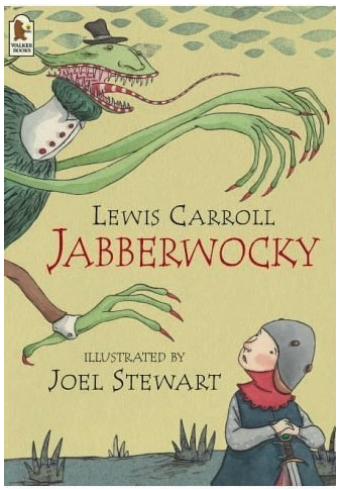
If Svankmajer's creative revision, a *Witty Jabberwocky* type is perplexing because of its play with ambiguous undecidability, many transmedia retellings of Carroll's classic opt for emphasising either the threatening or the laughable aspect of the nonsensical original. Whether psychic turmoil or comic relief is associated with the bizarre creature largely depends on the age of the target audience: Jabberwockies for children celebrate ludic joy, whereas Jabberwockies for adolescents are more preoccupied with the fictionalisation of troubling anxieties.

As for the latter, *Angst Jabberwocky* adaptation type, Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie's pro-porn feminist graphic novel *Lost Girls* traces a psychoanalytically informed trauma narrative in which grown-up heroines from children's classics, Alice from Wonderland, Wendy from *Peter Pan* and Dorothy from *Oz*, retrospectively revive their repressed childhood memories to benefit from the therapeutical powers of storytelling. Breaking taboos of speakability, the monstrous Jabberwock takes the shape of a gigantic penis chasing Alice in a haunting flashback of sexual abuse. In the first person shooter computer game, American McGee's *Alice*, the monstrous Jabberwock impersonates the remorse that torments young Alice for failing to rescue her parents from a housefire she did not stop because of fantasizing and being lost in a good book made her forgetful of reality. To flee the insane asylum where she has been incarcerated she must fight her inner demons, the greatest of them the Jabberwock. Cristina Henry's young adult, slasher horror novel, *Alice* is clearly inspired by McGee's video game: the amnesiac, neurotic heroine breaks out the madhouse in the company of hitman Mad Hatcher to take a bloody revenge on corrupted criminals of the underworld, the Walrus and

the Carpenter, and to defeat the ultimate agent of chaos, Jabberwock, a former dark sorcerer turned into shapeshifting monster who wants to drown the world in blood. Stéphane Jorisch's picturebook adaptation published in the Visions in Poetry series sets the poem in a modern, war-ridden, technologically supervised Orwellian landscape where the worldviews of two generations clash: the Jabberwock represents for the war veteran father a nostalgic symbol of military victory, whereas for the son the defeating of the monstrous other is just consolatory nonsense, a fancy dress performance to calm the old on their death beds, and what matters more is the relentless quest for hope, love, and empathy beyond the graves of the ancestors who would want descendants to inherit violent coping mechanisms. In Jorisch' vision, monsters come in many guises – contemporary media, politics, warfare, religion, and tradition might be among them.



Storytelling is a cheerful experience strengthening intergenerational bonds in the opening image of Joel Stewart's picturebook adaptation of "The Jabberwocky" that uses mixed media techniques to visually reinterpret the poem for the entertainment of child audiences. Stewart's world is not only colourful but also rich in acoustic imagery. The nonsensical creatures, the slithy toves, borogoves, and mome raths are reminiscent of songbirds or fairies each holding musical instruments, banjos and accordions, as they sing and dance. Even the monstrous Jabberwock, a combination of vegetal, bestial, humanoid, and mechanical features, evokes a musical automaton: when it is slayed, its bits and pieces, wires, springs, and keys are scattered apart to stop the noise and let the music start.



Animation adaptations embrace the *Droll Jabberwock* figure. Tom & Jerry's Jabberwock is a blue cartoon dragon in white Mickey Mouse gloves with a unicorn horn on its forehead and a goofy grin, who is chasing around the title characters in a caucus race like turmoil. The violence is inconsequential: Tom's gun received from the White Rabbit turns into a trumpet and the beast's horn into a flute, so they can improvise a jazz melody together before they embark on a series of mad adventures, including a tea party in a boat they sink with tea, a flight into outerspace

on dynamite bars, and an attempt to withdraw King Arthur's sword from the stone. The episode appeals to children's transmedia literacy, and invites them to recognise a variety of fantasy subgenre tropes, from myth through fairy tale to sci-fi. The mock nightmarish adventures end, once the Jabberwock is summoned back into the book of nonsensical poetry where it belongs.

Regardless of the fact whether Witty, Angst, or Droll Jabberwocks feature in transmedia repurposings of Carroll's classics – from the Muppets' show to Layla Holzer's shadowplay performance and Andrew Kay's musical pantomime – creative extensions mostly adopt the "crossover" fictional form to target multiple audiences. All strategically enhance interactivity to increase the 'pleasure of the text' by allowing for readers-spectators-listeners active communal cooperation in the (un)making of nonsensical meanings.

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