

ERROR TOWARDS JUDGEMENT.

HOW THE NUREMBERG CHRONICLE RECYCLES A PRE-CHRISTIAN IDEA

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Resumo: Ainda que firmemente baseada numa doutrina cristã, a Crónica de Nuremberga de 1493 abre com uma enumeração de ideias opostas relativamente à origem do mundo e do Homem. Esta primeira passagem é, porém, desde logo rotulada como sendo um erro. Contudo, enquanto o narrador estabelece uma verdade universal, outro erro surge proeminentemente como parte da dimensão factual da crónica. Através da análise intermedial dos textos e de xilogravuras, o presente texto pretende investigar então a forma como este incunábulo expõe uma variedade de inverdades com o eventual intuito de integrar uma destas na sua ideologia. **Palavras-chave:** Crónica do mundo; Incunábulo; Intermedialidade; Early New High German.

Abstract: Although firmly grounded in Christian doctrine, the 1493 Nuremberg Chronicle opens with an enumeration of conflicting ideas regarding the origin of the world and of mankind. This initial passage is quickly and effectively done away with by being labelled erroneous. However, while the narrator continues to establish a universal truth, one of the errors reappears, prominently, as part of the chronicle's facticity. Through the intermedial analysis of texts and woodcuts the paper investigates how the incunable exposes a multitude of falsehoods to eventually integrate one of them into its ideology.

Keywords: World chronicle; Incunable; Intermediality; Early New High German.

Although firmly grounded in Christian doctrine, the 1493 Nuremberg Chronicle opens with an enumeration of conflicting ideas regarding the origin of the world and of mankind. This initial passage is quickly and effectively done away with by being labelled erroneous. However, while the narrator continues to establish a universal truth, one of the errors reappears prominently as part of the chronicle's facticity. My paper will analyse the beginning of this incunable and attempt to demonstrate how the work exposes the reader to a multitude of falsehoods and eventually goes on to integrate one of them into its ideology. Since the source consists of text and image, this examination has to be intermedial. Therefore, my paper is divided into three parts. The first provides a general theory of book illustration, the second part introduces the illustrated chronicle and the third examines its treatment of errors.

Before I succumb to the conventions of dry analysis, allow me to share with you a metaphorical aperitif in the form of a bottle. This is not as unrelated as it might seem at first glance because, as containers, bottles share a number of attributes with books and images. As with the book and the image the spatiality of the bottle depends on a container-content relation. One can fill book and image with «almost anything [...], as long as it is flat and static»¹. And one can put almost anything into a bottle, as long as it fits through its opening and does

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¹ ELLESTRÖM, 2010: 1.

not exceed its capacity. If you fill the bottle with a liquid, you can see quite clearly how the exterior correlates with the content.

Every bottle forces its shape on its liquid content, but has to possess certain attributes, in order to hold liquids in the first place. With the book and the image there is a similar situation. At every evolutionary stage of writing and screen material the cover is to be understood as shape-giving, and the content as shape-demanding. The content defines the bottle as a water-bottle, a ship in a bottle, an aquarium, or as a wine bottle. The respective contents defines the book as an encyclopaedia, a songbook, a prayer book, a picture book or as a world chronicle. Thus the image can be the contents of the book. And when that is the case, we refer to the image as an illustration.

If one sticks to Marshall McLuhan's very open definition of a medium as «an extension of man», every container can be considered a medium². And it only really earns its right of existence in the moment of consumption.

The consumption of our wine bottle (as pleasing as it might be) can hardly be considered a very complex deed. It basically consists of lifting and tilting the bottle and leads to the natural drinking reflex. And after completion we are again left with nothing. Its metaphorical relevance for this paper would now be as empty as the bottle itself, unless we consider that there never was a bottle in the first place. All I had to offer was a mental image with its verbal description on the page, consumed by you, as my audience. And it is here in the act of consumption that information media like books and images depart from other containers.

Reading an illustrated book is not only a very complex process in itself, but it is also not instinctive and has to be learned — and one has to want it in order to do it. In comparison to other information media, Ursula Rautenberg calls the book certainly the most strenuous³. But all the expenditure is compensated with a marvellous transformation of its content. Because in the act of reading an illustrated book, the content sheds its flat and static appearance altogether, and stretches to the boundaries of the human world⁴.

Book Illustration transfers verbal context into a specific visual language. Regarding the chronology of creation, the image quite literally follows the text. But this order does not have to be shared by the audience. Depending on the intermedial arrangement as well as personal and situational preferences, the reader clearly experiences moments of inner ekphrasis, where the visual work of art can precede the verbal description which might deviate from or add to the source text. At times, the effect of the illustration might even dominate the reading experience. I would like to stress that the illustrated book should never be understood as an illustrated text. It is to be understood as a media combination, meaning that two conventionally distinct media (in this case text and image) contribute to the meaning of the whole⁵. The narrative does not end with the text, but continues through the imagery.

Once captured on paper, the world no longer disintegrates into polar opposites. The forces come to rest through the function of limited space⁶. Reading brings time to the book

² MCLUHAN, 1994: 5.

³ RAUTENBERG, 2002: 41.

⁴ WITTGENSTEIN, 2003: 86.

⁵ RAJEWSKY, 2002: 15.

⁶ BENDA, 2005: 48-49.

space. It provides it with dimension, fills it with meaning⁷. The medium of the book is the bottle that never runs out. It is the cake you can have and eat at the same time. And we encounter a particularly nourishing example of the medium in a 1493 incunable which goes by multiple names, but is most commonly known in the English speaking realm as *Nuremberg Chronicle*. Quite fittingly, I think, because it was commissioned, compiled, written, illustrated, translated and printed in the late medieval city of Nuremberg.

Before pointing out a very prominent intermedial error at the beginning of the *Nuremberg Chronicle*, a short introduction to this illustrated book itself seems necessary. And I would like to leave the first words of that introduction to Hartmann Schedel, the author/compiler of the 1493 *Nuremberg Chronicle*. As part of the *Commendatio* to the chronicle he writes:

*Make your way, o book, and take swiftly to the skies; Go! Rush around the globe and end your way still in the scholar's hand*⁸.

Today the *Nuremberg Chronicle* indeed rushes around the globe — online. But to be able to understand its integration of errors properly, my more or less scholarly hands needed to get in contact with an actual copy of the book.

Therefore I travelled from Porto to Berlin. At the *Staatsbibliothek*, the Berlin State Library, my request for the incunable was met with a reaction I did not anticipate. The lady at the desk of the rare books' reading room seemed utterly alarmed when I ordered the *Nuremberg Chronicle*. She whispered something into her phone, told me to wait and then left. And while I was still asking myself whether I had offended her, a man ordered me out to the copy area. To my relief he immediately started to laugh and introduced himself as the head of the Department of Early Printed Books. Then he told me about a mix-up. «You could not possibly be the guy we are looking for», he said. «Because I suppose you are not yet 60 years old». I agreed, thanked him for the observation and was informed about the curious case of a so called book marten, a man who under various aliases was travelling to libraries across Europe. On arrival he orders old and valuable books, and cuts out single pages in order to sell them on later. In fact, in the last few years this man seemed to have always ordered only one particular book: the *Nuremberg Chronicle*.

The reason, why even single pages of the *Nuremberg Chronicle* have such great resale value — and therefore attract criminal attention — is quite obvious: in addition to being over 500 years old, the book is masterly and excessively illustrated from its beginning (at the creation of the world) until its end (at the Last Judgement). Over 645 wood-blocks were manufactured in the studio of the artist Michael Wolgemut⁹ and it is even speculated that his apprentice, the young Albrecht Dürer individually contributed to the book's decoration. This leads to over 1800 images in the *Nuremberg Chronicle*.

Aside from the sheer magnitude of its illustration, the book was first to mention its illustrators by name. While this does not herald a new understanding of art, it can very well be

⁷ BAKHTIN, 2008: 8.

⁸ My translation of the Latin *Commendatio* based on Stephan FÜSSEL's German translation (FÜSSEL, 1996: 6).

⁹ BRUNNER, 1997: 357-358.

understood as a step away from its singular notion as craftsmanship. The imagery includes traditional biblical iconography, genealogical trees, succession lines of popes and emperors, and images of towns and natural phenomena. In their execution and style, the woodcuts are quite modern, illustrations of a new type of book.

However, there is the issue of visual authenticity. The fact that some of the woodcuts are based on topical elements and others are based on authentic imagery leads to the conclusion that visually communicated information is always corrected or rather added to — through textual explanations¹⁰. Thus the images must usually be considered an interpretation of the text¹¹.

The text itself is a compilation from various sources and tries to be nothing but that. Hartmann Schedel put more emphasis on consistency of content than on stylistic composition. His selections show shortening of the source texts much more frequently than new formulations. He tried to omit the superfluous and rearrange the relevant. Memorable and therefore potentially popular anecdotes for example were often presented in their original entirety¹². Without creative intention his text arrangements still turned out as something new. As Klaus Vogel says he unwittingly: «composed traditional melodies in a modern way»¹³.

In the final part of my paper I now wish to examine the beginning of the *Nuremberg Chronicle* to highlight an unconventional confrontation of conflicting ideas. Following title and register the preface of the *Nuremberg Chronicle* is the first coherent text in the book. It includes a summary of the world's creation. The narrator refers to Moses, as master of the whole truth and father of God's historians. The world of the book is supposed to be based on the following familiar story:

Als nw got das geschoepff der werlt gemacht hett do hot er den ersten vnd groesisten sun fuergesetzt dem vnermessnen werck vnd sich des selben als eins radtgeber vnd werckmeisters in ertrachtung. zierung vnd machung der ding geprauchet. Dann der selb ist an kluegheit vnd vernunfft vnd macht volkommen. Es ist auch zefragen warauß got dise so grosse vnd so wunderperliche ding gemacht hab. dann er hat alle ding gemacht auß nichten. daruemb ist gar uil gerechter vngeachtet der vnentpfintlichen vnd eiteln ding die augen do hin zu wenden da der stul. da die wonung des waren gottes ist. der das ertreich mit bestendiger vestikeit. auffgehenckt den himel mit scheinenden sternen vnderschieden die allerclarsten sunnen vnd ainig liecht zu beweynung seiner ainigen mayestat den menschlichen dingen angezuendet. das ertreich mit dem mere vmbringet. die wasserflues mit ewigen abfal zefliessen gebotten vnd den felderden sich auß zepraiten. den talleren sich zeszencken. den walden sich mit lawbgewachs zebedecken. vnd die staynigen perg auffzesteigen verschaffet hat (1r).

(As God created the earth, he placed at the head of his infinite work the first and greatest son, employing him as a counselor and master-craftsman in the planning, beautification and creation of things. For he was sufficiently endowed with wisdom and understanding. It is also asked out of what God made these great and wonderful things, for he made all things out of nothing;

¹⁰ FÜSSEL, 1994: 7-8.

¹¹ OTT, 2000: 126.

¹² VOGEL, 1994: 93.

¹³ VOGEL, 1994: 97.

and therefore it is more righteous that insensible trifling things be ignored and the eyes directed to the seat, where is the abode of the true God, who endowed the earth with everlasting solidity, hung up shining stars in the heavens, distinguished the clearest suns, surrounded the earth with the sea, caused the rivers to flow, the fields to spread out, the valleys to sink, the forests to bedeck themselves with foliage, and the rocky mountains to rise)¹⁴.

So far, so conventional. But when locating the passage within the preface we realize that the Christian concept of the origin of the world and mankind is preceded by another paragraph.

Diweill bey den allgerelertisten vnd fuernamsten mannen die die waren natur vnd geschicht beschriben haben von geschopff der welt. vnd von erster geburt der menschen zwayerlay wone ist. So wollen wir von disen vordern zeiten: den anfang nemende auf das kuertzst schreiben (1r).

(As it sometimes happens among the most learned and distinguished men who have written of the true nature and history of the creation of the world and the birth of man, that two different accounts exist, so we will begin with those early times and write briefly of those remote matters as far as is possible, considering their age)¹⁵.

The *Nuremberg Chronicle* starts with alternatives to the Christian doctrine of origin. And one deviation stands out: because the initial passage goes on to explain that the Greeks had the theory that, before the beginning of all the things of heaven and earth and while these things were still together, there existed but a single form. Furthermore, they thought that through the separation and division of matter, the world took on the order and structure in which it can now be seen. It is thus referred to the Aristotelian concept of *yle*, a primary essential substance from which everything separated.

This pre-Christian idea, like all of the initial passage, is quickly and effectively done away with by calling it an *Irrtum*, an error (1r). In this way the narrator establishes everything before the *Irrtum* as false and everything that follows it as truth. The decision to start the book with a multitude of falsehoods seems extraordinary. Two pages later the book's actual incipit follows:

In dem anfang hat got beschaffen himel vnd erden aber die erde was eytel vnd lere vnd die finsternus waren auff dem antlitz des abgrunds vnd der gaist des herren swebet oder ward getragen ob den wassern (2r).

(In the beginning God created heaven and earth. And the earth was void and empty. And darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God moved over the waters)¹⁶.

This biblical quote leads into exegesis. The narrator identifies Moses again as his source. Then the more abstract source text is spread out and paraphrased and becomes tactile sto-

¹⁴ HARTMANN SCHEDEL, 1493: 1r. (Walter W. Schmauch's English translation).

¹⁵ HARTMANN SCHEDEL, 1493: 1r (Walter W. Schmauch's English translation).

¹⁶ HARTMANN SCHEDEL, 1493: 2r (Walter W. Schmauch's English translation).

rytelling. God is declared the Creator and Ordainer of all things, He Who performs one manual operation after the other. His creation follows a clear chronology which is further enforced by expressions of time or temporal connotation. «First» (*zu allererst*) He transformed heaven into His throne «and thereafter» (*vnd dar nach*) He created the earth and subordinated it to heaven. Later He ties the eternal light, the celestial spirits and the eternal life to heaven and assigns darkness to earth and death.

In this way the divine creation is transformed into craftsmanship which is encountered in the imagery throughout the six days of creation. The beginning of the first age of the world is consistent with the status quo, but then for some reason another idea of origin is mentioned. It is no surprise that the difference between right and wrong again hinges on the *Irrung*, another word for error.

And again the Greeks find themselves on the wrong side of truth:

Die kriechen sprechen yle sey die erst vngeformt materi auß der: alle ding geschoepfft: vnd dise sichtpere element die sich mit etlicher eintrechtigkeit einander vergleichen geformt. oder (als die andern sprechen) von der materi vnd form. oder von den aller dynnisten staub in der sunnen glantz erscheinende gemacht seyen (2r).

(The Greeks say that Yle was the first shapeless mass out of which all things were created, and that these visible things were formed of elements that were in harmony with each other; or (as others say) of matter and form, or were made of the finest dust that sparkles in the sunlight)¹⁷.

In the attempt to again dispose of *yle*, the original matter introduced by the Greeks, the narrator positions God before it, narratively temporal, conceptually as an essence above all time — He Whose power is infinite. And nowhere does it become clearer how the other temporality, the other idea of the beginning is caught (or rather captured) in the dominant Christian doctrine of the *Nuremberg Chronicle*, than with the woodcut on the same page. The entire page provides a remarkable example of word «and image» coexisting «within the same space»¹⁸. The image shows a blessing hand reaching out of the clouds. The outer circle contains the angelic sphere beneath the Holy Ghost, the inner circle has the single calligraphic word «yle». Horst Wenzel calls the hand of God a central symbol of creation that encapsulates word and deed, showing and narrating, counting and recounting¹⁹. The woodcut illustrates the moment of divine creation of the Holy Ghost, the heavenly choir of angels and the single word.

Through the inclusion of *yle* it shows the beginning of the world as «Word» that «was with God»²⁰. The combination of text and image in the same space stems from the visual attempt to illustrate how God creates matter out of nothing through verbalization. That the word clearly refers to a philosophical concept of antiquity shows a scholarly humanistic (and effective) way to create abstraction, which is visually intensified by the fact that its letters are

¹⁷ HARTMANN SCHEDEL, 1493: 2r.

¹⁸ KIBÉDI VARGA, 1989: 39.

¹⁹ WENZEL, 2000: 15.

²⁰ John 1, 1.

aesthetically distorted almost beyond readability. The word of God is supposed to be witnessed in the world, not read or understood by the mere mortal. Medial coexistence manages to attach visual spirituality to the word, elevates its meaning beyond the narrative, and conquers the entire «faulty» concept.

When both text and image inhabit the same space, the verbal component integrates into the visual composition to produce a combined semantic effect which almost reflects an immediacy of perception. The reading of the words and the conscious verbalization of the visual components take place in one stream of undivided narration. Additionally, the words that are drawn into a picture (especially of spiritual context) are elevated into the same spheres of greater meaning and truth. The interdependence and interreference of both visual and textual components create the impression of a dialogue between text and image, which can be directed by the reader. In this way, one medium can elicit statements of increased subtlety and complexity from the other. In the case of the *Nuremberg Chronicle* it means, that previously pronounced errors can be integrated into one single intermedial experience which is more meaningful than the sum of its parts.

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