Editor's Introduction

Imagined encounters: Historiographies for a new world

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[H]e holds his biro with a steady hand and adds a word to the page, a word the historian never wrote, that for the sake of historical truth he could never have brought himself to write, the word *Not*, and what the book now says is that the crusaders will *Not* help the Portuguese to conquer Lisbon, thus it is written and has come to be accepted as true, although different, what we would call false has come to prevail over what we would call true, falsehood has replaced the truth, and someone would have to narrate the history anew, and how.

–Saramago, 1997, 40

José Saramago's *History of the Siege of Lisbon* is structured around the single act of a transgressive proofreader, who, in an act of courage and frustration, alters the course of history with the insertion of the word 'not' into an historical text (Saramago, 1989, trans. 1997). By negating a crucial statement in a book on the siege of Lisbon, the proofreader then sets out precisely to rewrite the history of the siege, which *now* had not yet happened or at least no longer on the same terms. Historians must often reconstruct the nature of their objects and audiences in order to produce narratives about their visual interactions and textual lives. Through excavations, primary texts and artifacts, cultures of reception are

1 Here I am describing my own work and process in attempting to articulate the use and context of the Byzantine liturgical textile known as the Thessaloniki Epitaphios. I framed this work intentionally as an 'imagined encounter' following the methods and prescriptions of my field. By way of this note, I seek to rehabilitate that work as a part of this volume, whose existence outside of disciplinary confines demonstrates the imperative of the imagined encounter to creatively and imaginatively 'consider the speculative possibilities offered by such objects as valid historical options lest we overlook the full complexities of such reticent artifacts, past and present' (Betancourt, 2015, 535).

articulated and experiences with objects and things are extrapolated. This work often becomes cultural interpolation, constructing unifying narratives that fill in the gaps, smoothing over the lost intervals of difference. Similar to a proofreader's ethical code, historians operate with an infinite list of assertions and negations that define the possibility of certain inquiries and narratives.

The scholar knows, for example, that an eleventh-century Byzantine viewer did not use an iPad for worship. While we understand both the visualities of a Byzantine beholder and the workings of the iPad, the extrapolation of this encounter is forbidden as a scholarly narrative. Yet, for an art historian in particular, methodologically there would be little difference between contouring how a Byzantine viewer would have used an iPad, and extrapolating how they might have used a Byzantine icon for which the precise context of use and creation now eludes us, as is often the case. If we were to attempt to understand, for example, the use and context of a Byzantine liturgical textile whose location of facture and multiple afterlives are lost to us, we would turn to other such objects and consider their various formal similarities and differences to our own object; we would seek out textual sources that might elucidate contemporaneous practices for a similar type of object; and we would scour a myriad of texts and representations of the liturgy to find passing glimpses into how the object might have been used and what forms of signification and effect it might have had.¹ The same naturally could be done with any contemporary object in its present day context, but also – if one dares – with a contemporary object imagined in a Byzantine context. That is to say, we could search the same sites to consider how a contemporary object could have been deployed and understood in an eleventh-century Byzantine context.

Such an avenue of investigation need not be futile nor facile: one could persuasively argue that in contemporary visual culture, images exist within a similar rhetoric as they did in Byzantium. Then as now, the image had two natures – one divine and one human in Byzantium, one digital and one physical today. That is to say: the image exists both as a code and visual manifestation of that code, which are inseparably united in the entity that is conceived of as *the image*. This duality produces a gamut of perceptions and phenomenological engagements with the world that define the manner in which images are created, displayed, shared and received. Like Saramago's transgressive proofreader, one could write the history of the Byzantine tablet computer, whose affordances and uses could have suited the phenomenological valances of Byzantine icon veneration as the viewer lovingly scrolled through and touched images, looking closely and zooming in to their details and contours. The application of Byzantine visuality and image theory to contemporary visual culture could also offer us new and innovative understandings of the lives and possibilities of our own digital image.

The historian's version of the medieval viewer or reader is rarely a specific person or entity, but oftentimes a discursive conglomerate of socio-cultural practices, ideas

and habits from which we construct a sentient interpreter, whose possible and potential responses are then telegraphed into our analytic writings and historical chronicles. Nothing prevents the interpolation of the medieval viewer's encounter with an iPad except the knowledge, on our part, that this would be an imaginary encounter. Nevertheless, we engage in the same processes of imaginative and discursive reconstruction when we produce any historical narrative.

This volume encourages the suspension of disbelief and the negation of such limiting historical givens in order to construct *imagined* – rather than imaginary – encounters. Unlike the imaginary encounter, the imagined encounter is not an encounter that is merely made up as a figment of the imagination, but rather an encounter that *is* and exists even though it was imagined by our mental faculties. Like fan fiction, which lubricates the creation of possible and potential worlds and events in keeping with the canon and the things that are known, the imagined encounter endeavors to undertake the same operation within scholarship: creating conditions of possibility from what is known to imagine new and potential narratives across objects and things that exist equally across time and space.

Sometimes a dead end or impossibility in a research project, caused by the misalignment of dates or lacunae in the archive, could potentially arrest the development of immensely fruitful and innovative arguments that would reshape our understanding of the medieval world and our own. Critically, however, the production of such narratives, arguably deemed 'forgeries' of history, is not some exterior corrupting force, but truly akin to the historiography that produces unified, coherent and compelling arguments out of the fragmented and ever-withdrawing past. Thus, seizing this postulation that the process of history itself is always a discursive tool for the structuring of imagined encounters and communities, this volume is particularly interested in how processes of historical enfoldment allow for new conceptualizations of familiar materials, allowing for a plurality of voices to coexist and emerge from the collision of two distinct spaces and coming to terms with how they vary, differ and wholly ignore one another. By producing such imagined encounters, we glimpse the rhetorical and performative options for the production of history within and outside of academia.

The essays and contributors brought together here reflect on at times impossible, unlikely or unsubstantiated encounters between past audiences and modern forms of culture – or, they contemplate those imagined encounters that have neatly and pervasively already occurred within the historical record, and which therefore provide ample room for future and willful emergences. Our goal is to articulate how this new historiography could be used to further scholarship and history-making as a socially engaged form of contemporary action and activism. Each paper here structures its own meta-narratives, simultaneously constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing its theoretical foundations and motivations within the space of its singular utterance. The papers establish the methodological foundation for research strategies that fold historical time and place distinct communities in dialogue with one another – a process that may help

us put cross-temporal and cross-cultural dialogue into the very structure of our scholarship, rather than have it emerge as an afterthought.

The work of artist Murat Palta offers a pictorial correlative to the scholarly methods embraced in this issue of *postmedieval*. In his series *Incarnated by Words*, which builds on his earlier project entitled *Classic Movies in Miniature Style*, Palta imagines what important books and movies would look like if painted by Ottoman and Persian miniaturists. Taking on style as an historical index, Palta's work produces imagined encounters between contemporary popular culture and the medieval, early modern world.

In his rendition of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, the image depicts the critical scene of the Council of Elrond from the book of the same name neatly folding in J.R.R. Tolkien's own interest in the Middle Ages, evident in his writing, and refracting it across the epic story's various literary and cinematic iterations (Figure 1). As such, intrinsic to this work are several imagined encounters. Taking its formal cues both from Tolkien's description in the novel (Tolkien, [1954] 2012) and its depiction in Peter Jackson's 2001 film, the miniature portrays the crucial moment in which Gimli attempts to destroy the One Ring with his axe (Jackson, 2001). It is in this instant that the indestructibility of the object is revealed, and the Fellowship understands the need to journey to Mount Doom to dissolve the Ring in its fires, launching the narrative of the trilogy's quest.

Space is diagrammatically flattened here, depicting an outdoor–indoor scene centered upon the figure of Elrond. Elrond is dressed austere with a simple shirt and long red vest over loose-fitting pants, and seated with his legs tucked underneath on a floral carpet, coming across as a personage of spiritual rather than royal significance. He is framed by an architectural form that suggests a small domed chamber with complex tile decoration within. The spandrels feature a purple background covered in multi-colored, interlacing vegetal motifs with flowers that allude to the lavish painted-tile exteriors of Safavid architecture, such as the seventeenth-century site of Isfahan. Within the arch, the light blue lattice work suggests a similar materiality, perhaps alluding to an elaborate *muqarnas* as might be commonly found inside a dome. The architectural form is terminated at ground level with dado panels decorated with floral motifs, rosettes and an intricate lattice work typical of such lower-level panels. The gold sky and swirling flurry of clouds is in keeping with fourteenth- through sixteenth-century trends in painting throughout the Persianate world under the Ilkhanids, Timurids and Safavids. This style of wispy clouds itself emerged from contact with contemporaneous Chinese painting, while the gold-ground skies suggest an allusion to Byzantine icons as well. The outdoor royal setting of the Council of Elrond lends itself particularly well to many Persianate rulers' predilection for gardens and tents, often depicted in the manuscript tradition wherein a ruler holds court in an outdoor setting before elaborate, towering tents. The inclusion of the three Hobbits Sam, Merry and Pippin, in the top-left corner of the scene beyond a balustrade, positions them as marginal figures that playfully listen in to the events

Figure 1: Murat Palta, 'The Fellowship of the Ring,' *Incarnated by Words*, print on paper, 2015.
Photo: Courtesy of the Artist.

unfolding – also a common visual trope within Persianate miniatures and also earlier medieval European art.

While based on the literary depiction of the scene in Tolkein's book, visually it is evident that the miniature draws its language from the Peter Jackson film. The figure of Boromir on the lower right forms his hand into a circle, which, while alluding to gestures found in such miniatures, likewise cites the moment when Sean Bean, playing the role of Boromir, utters the line 'the Great Eye is ever watchful,' fashioning his hand into the Eye of Sauron. This line comes from the monologue that opens with the often-memed quote, 'One does not simply walk into Mordor.' Likewise, Gandalf's twisted wood staff and Gimli's axe follow their filmic depiction.

Hence, Murat Palta's work is a multivalent imagined encounter that not only aggregates a history of late medieval and early modern manuscript illumination through its stylistic articulations, but also folds into its visual language the film's imaginings of this neo-medieval world, whereby various artistic styles from Art Nouveau to Gothic are deployed to forge an archeology for Tolkein's medievalizing landscape (Woodward and Kourelis, 2006). Critically, Palta's miniature features a synchronous narrative that collapses several events into one scene – as is often the case in miniatures of the early modern Islamic world – given that Boromir's monologue comes shortly after Gimli's failed attempt to hew the Ring, which is depicted in the foreground as about to happen. It is possible to take this synchronicity as a metaphor for the work's own acts of synchronization, which seek to make the early modern contemporary with our own world, seizing the trans-temporal and historiographic force of the imagined encounter.

While the essays in this volume offer examples and possibilities for structuring such imagined encounters textually through scholarship, Murat Palta's work demonstrates a visual, artistic alternative to this methodology. Palta's work has proven its efficacy and currency in contemporary popular culture, as his imaginings have been widely circulated on a variety of platforms ranging from tumblr to *BuzzFeed*, and may be placed within a broader context of medieval memes that actively re-frame historical content by either imagining modern images in a medieval style or subversively recontextualizing medieval images via text and circulation. Such practices structure the imagined encounter as a quotidian possibility, opening new historiographic spaces for trans-historical encounters and collisions in our daily lives and scholarship alike.

The subtitle of this volume, 'Historiographies for a New World,' suggests the potential that the imagined encounter has as a way of emancipating and rehabilitating disenfranchised groups and people through a reconsideration of the world-enabling tenets of histories and their effects. In Saramago's text, the irony is that, in the end, history is not all that different since the proofreader sets out to *re-write* the history of the siege of Lisbon. Lisbon in the end is seized. History has been rewritten, revised and ultimately repeated. In a sense, the imagined encounter struggles with the same potential end. Yet, as Saramago writes soon after the proofreader's insertion, as the narrator contemplates what might

happen if and when the author discovers the alteration to his page proofs: 'if he were to take the trouble to read the word and understand what has come to be written, the world, at that moment amended once more, he will have lived differently for one brief instant' (Saramago, 1997, 41), even if in the end the proofs would be corrected from the proofer's own 'correction.' In these same terms, the imagined encounter need not change everything forever, but rather its emancipatory efficacy comes precisely from that momentary suspension, from that momentary ability to live differently, even if for just a brief instance. In these moments of silent modification, in the act of reading or seeing itself, the imagined encounter flashes with the vision of another world so as to enliven possibilities often denied and prohibited from us. Perhaps, if they do not change the course of history, they at least allow us to partake in such ruptures, seeking not only respite, but also enlivening the potential for further change and setting out the imperative for us to think queerly about all the possible and potential narratives that may well be true, but which reason and decorum have thus far prohibited us from pursuing in good faith.

About the Author

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