

Phantasmagorie, Simulacre and the Danger of Dragonlance

What happens when you expose fantasy-larp to canonical fin-de-siècle concepts and postmodern cultural theory?

Does it come out as shallow entertainment, or does it survive with all its inner potential being a little more clear and palpable?

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Introduction

This article is based on an exam paper on the subject of Modern Cultural History. In this paper, it was my main attempt to try my hand at imposing canonical modern cultural theory upon larp. As the relatively new phenomena larp is, it can hardly be said to be history yet, though most definitely an element within modern culture. Therefore my attempt to wrestle the big boys of modern cultural theory into a larp-related framework, to provide my tiny part to the process of a general recognition of larp as more than the somewhat suspicious hobby of rather immature young people. This article contains the main results of my research, the theoretical framework, and my further reflections in a larp-perspective. It is my hope that this work can participate to the understanding of the constitution, processes and potentials of larp; the theoretical body which in my view has one simple but noble overall goal: To provide us with better live action role play. However, it is of some importance to me to stress that I am not of the opinion that the larp-experience should necessarily hold the potential of being more

than simply entertainment. It is, in my view, perfectly acceptable to strive no higher than to entertain or be entertained when dealing within the context of larp. After all, as entertainment goes, larp is one of the most substantial and fulfilling genres you can turn to. This being said, the best entertainment is the best only because it draws upon something more than the quick fix. That is of course the case with larp, and it is this notion of “more” that I set out to explore.

In this article I will investigate the notion of space that larp generates, and the potential containments of this space. As a larp is a dialectic creation undertaken by both participants and fictive framework, the first part of the article will deal mostly with the part of the participant and the second with the fictive background of the larp. I will attempt to account for the constitution of the larp-space in between imagination and reality, by means of explaining the phenomena of larp through German cultural theorist Walter Benjamin's concept of phantasmagorie¹ (a concept which, fear not, will be explained later). This will lead to a discussion of whether there can be said to be a potential for remembrance² within the larp. I will seek to give a further perspective on this through the literary concept of the mythic method as stated by the modernist poet T.S. Eliot, as a part of the discussion of the main problem of my article: Can fantasy-larp be said

to contain the potential of profound learning and understanding? Or does it lead to nothing but the infertile codex remembrance of the simulacre (also subjects of later and further explanation), of which French post-modern theorist Jean Baudrillard³ speaks?

I will focus in the fantasy-based larp, mainly because it is within that area my main practical experience lies. Furthermore, the fantasy-genre easily provides the material for an analysis of mythical elements as it draws so openly upon the structures and stereotypes of the myth. The theory can, however, be used on all genres of imaginative context and larp-processes.

Space of the larp

As stated before, the space of the larp consist of both the real and the imagined: Initially, what we are dealing with in larp is an abstract space of imagination, a fictive world which »borrows« place, time and people from the real world in order to materialize. Firstly, we shall see how this abstract space is constituted, and then how it changes the concrete space.

The space of the larp is initially based upon to set, fictive elements: A certain »world«, complete with its own geography, ethnography, theology, history and present; and a set of rules which form the »natural laws«, without which anything would

be possible within the fictional world. By participating you forms a »pact«, promising to hold these two elements true as you take on the part of your character. You let the mind of your character –and thereby also a small part of your own- be moulded by this simulated world order, and you think, speak and act from these premises as soon as the scenario starts. This is of crucial importance to the constitution of the larp: everybody must join the game. Thus, fictional world and set of rules is transformed from fiction to fact though the common validation; facts which are so comprehensive that they contain the power to create a convincing illusion of reality as soon as anyone agrees to the premises.



Moreover, it is not only the consciousness of the participants that take form from the fiction, but the real surroundings undergo the same process. Through the participant, the fictive world order is weaved into the seams of the actual surroundings. Tattered plastic pavilions becomes the revered temple of a high deity, the din of the highway turns into the distant roar of a great waterfall. It is all in the (minds) eye of the beholder. Furthermore, costumes, setting and acting makes the fiction tactile and “real”. The more realities it is imposed upon, the fact-fiction seem to turn more and more to the factual side, and so the real world, which could be suspected to have a destructive effect on the illusory space of the larp, is in stead constituting it.

Larp as a phantasmagorie

On to the theoretical framework: For further explanation of the dialectical constitution of the larp, we will turn to the concept of phantasmagorie. In »Paris, Capital of the 19th century«, Walter Benjamin writes of the phantasmagorie: A vision which society produces from a dialectical idea of both the new and a common ancient memory, in an utopical repression of reality. The similarities are already visible, as larp basically emerges from the common participation in imagining the fictive world. Furthermore, the vision of the larp can be said to stem from both the new and the elements of ancient

myth.

The structures of ancient myths are the rather obvious skeleton of the fantasy genre, on which the fantasy-larp is based. Their metaphorical and well-known existential conflicts are ideal when creating the »perfect« world of the phantasmagorie. By »perfect« I do not mean a world where all is good. Fantasy-worlds has dystopian as well a utopian features, as it is not the goal of this genre to offer an alternative to the real world. It only offers a repression of the real, and in this context a perfect world is a world where everything has meaning and is interesting. By taking on the universe of the myth, the fantasy-work obtains both: it offers a model for understanding life while at the same time entertaining the mind with these narratives, which have fascinated it for time beyond measure. In this form, the fantasy-larp make use of the ancient, »das veraltete«⁴ as Benjamin puts it.

The utopian element of »the new« in Benjamins phantasmagorie-concept is similar to the present created by the participants in a larp. The action develops though normal, daily-life situations enacted by the normal, daily-life human being which is the participant.

But in the fantasy-larp, acts and actor has an aura of supernatural power. Firstly because every act within the fantasy-world is integrated in its context of mythic and adventurous

elements. Furthermore, the actor will participate in the form of a »mythical« being, such as elf, ogre, hero, fairytale princess, or just mythical in the sense that the character is born and raised in the surroundings of a fantasy. Any move in these surroundings has a hint of something exiting and interesting, because it draws upon the stuff that dreams are made of. Secondly because even the most innocent act of daily life in the larp matters enormously in constituting the fictive world, and those who do the acting become all-important participants in the manifestation of the common utopia. Thus the acts escapes the triviality of daily life and the actor becomes somewhat »more« than human in the common sense. He/she becomes a mythical being who possesses the power to both constitute and change the world around him/her.

When speaking of the phantasmagorie-ical larp and its attraction, one must also account for the psychological aspect of control. Whereas reality can seem confused and incalculable, the larp-world is after all oversee able. There will always be rules, books and game masters to consult, and no fatal surprises can occur. Moreover, the individual can freely decide on his role in society, as well as on the wished character of his/her person. All of this is a matter of repression of reality, of the trivial as well as the actually unpleasant, and there is no point in denying that this repression is for many a participant

an important part of the fascination a larp. This motive points to the larp a phantasmagorie: with Benjamin, it is the fetishized commodity which hides the reality of the market forces. With the larp, it is the utopia of an interesting life of adventure, power and control that hides a trivial and meaningless reality of daily life. But does this mean that larp is no more than a refugee camp for the victims of a confused world? In some ways, yes. But it would be a camp with a library, cinema, museums, art studios and a wrestling ring. The potential of gaining knowledge, experience and creative challenge within a larp reaches far beyond most other utopias. But before we enter this area of investigation, we shall have a look at the larp's means of communication.

Simulation –good or evil?

What is at stake when entering a simulation so overwhelming as the larp can be? When something unreal is so fascinating, do we benefit intellectually from the freedom of imagination it offers or do we lose our critical sense in an easy escape from the real world?

In order to discuss this, I will introduce IT-scientist Bill Nichols's analysis of the risk of forfeiture when dealing with a simulated reality. Nichols uses the notion of adoption to illustrate the process: Two premises have to be present for a child to accept a surrogate mother. Firstly, a higher instance of power

must constitute and maintain to the child that the surrogate mother is in fact the real mother. Secondly, the child must experience that the surrogate fulfils its needs better than the real mother. The same process is present when dealing with a surrogate reality, such as that of the internet, the commercial or of course the larp. The individual is exposed to massive visual and intellectual stimulation/persuasion from the media of the simulation, who wants to step in as surrogate reality. I use the active term »wants«, because in the case of the commercial, the goal is to make the potential customer accept the reality of the commercial, a reality where the product in question is the centre of the world, and thereby egging him/her to invest in it. The result is, theoretically, that the individual loses itself into the simulation, forgets to reflect upon both itself and its surroundings, and lets itself be dictated by the doctrine of the simulation become surrogate become real.

The larp also wants to exist –but not (yet) in order to sell some commodity. Still, it has the same potential of selling a message, a view of the world or any doctrine on which the larp is founded. This makes the simulation of the larp such a powerful media: in a culture longing for something better, utopia is a popular product. But in order to have the product of a larp, one must live the product. To return to the adoption-figure, the participant of the larp becomes both the child and

the higher instance who consolidates and maintain the simulation. This positioning is the premises behind role playing as an educational tool, a method which is very frequently used in dealing with group dynamics and other psychological processes. Though the simulation, participants experience certain situations, and through further supervised work with the results, the individual gains new knowledge of him/herself. And this is why the larp will always have a stronger potential for generating new knowledge and active remembrance than a TV-commercial or any other pre-fabricated entertainment-narrative: larp contains the constant possibility of a meta-reflection which reminds the participant of his/her own part in the creation, and therefore his/her ability to change the simulation and the results. And when the participant remembers this, he/she also has the ability to subscribe the actions of the character to his/her own active reflection, and thereby take the acquired knowledge with him/her into real life.

Larp and the simulacre

As we have seen, the simulation is a powerful tool. But since we are dealing with a media of this great potential for learning and creating, how come that so many a fantasy-larp ends up in 4 o'clock mayhem and general boredom? Where do we loose the connection to profound experience and active remembrance and end up bored, off-gaming by

the campfire. The answers are of course multiple, but to stay within the theoretical framework, we shall seek one explanation in post-modernity criticism, namely from Jean Baudrillards concept of the simulacre. Baudrillard speaks of how history and the historical object has been drained of meaning in the –the reaches further than the well known idea of the disenchanted world of Max Weber: The disenchanted object is re-installed into a simulated, enchanted context, a process which mocks whatever meaning the object might have contained once, in the name of entertainment and appearance. But through the media of the simulation we, the audience, is lured into believing that this shallow construction is identical with something original, something authentic. When a simulation is set with the accepted codes of cultural/historical thinking, our imagination locks upon these fixed structures. We do not remember or reflect, we merely reproduce –as Baudrillard says, we experience a codex remembrance. We forget that there is further thinking to be done, and simply accept the simulated version of the world. We become the dog of Pavlov: reacting in preset patterns to receive the prize; the prize which is in this case nothing but recognition within the cliché.

It should be rather obvious how to imply this thinking onto larp: The simulation is present as the ground principle of the larp, the

»enchantment« is almost concrete in terms of supernatural elements, and the object, installed into this simulated sense of wonder and truth, is –any one of us. It is the larp'er. For Baudrillard this image of a human being as the musealized object is an image of a living body caught in a giant ice cube. This is to say, that larp is at the same time both killing the player and preserving him/her as a fake proof of lived life. This line of thinking is perhaps a bit too abstract and dramatic for real-life reflection, but nevertheless it has its points. Larp has its tendencies to numb the edges of reason, to simplify conflicts to the verge of stupidity, and to promote stereotypes to the brink of nausea. These symptoms are those of man exposed to the simulacre in Baudrillard's theory. The problem that we will have to go about, is that

the concept of the simulacre is one of the main bricks in Baudrillard's apocalyptic vision of the modern world going down the drain with the laughing skeletons of museum directors (and, if he had known, I supposelarp-organisers)tearingmadly at the steering wheel. This vision is not exactly fertile ground for criticism any longer, as it seems the world actually survived both the coming of museum cafés and the development of home cable TV and other cancers of modern entertainment culture. However, the thought of the infertile simulation seems to remain a major point in criticism. So if we leave the apocalyptic vision and assume that the world will go on a bit, we can zoom in on larp from this point.

The danger of Dragonlance

Popular fantasy, such as the much



picked-upon Dragonlance-series and similar products of more or less cliché-infused kind, is the base inspiration of many a brave new larp-world. This genre of reference has obtained the status of a sort of collective memory of larp'ers, in spite of the fact that it is largely recognized to be no more than rather shallow entertainment; the written equivalent of your average Hollywood action/romance commodity. The conflicts are extremely simple and the structures of race, gender and religion are stereotypical and reflective of a traditional white patriarchal Christian set of values. The attempts to turn right and wrong relative notions seldom reaches any further than chapter one in the psychological handbook, look under »Oedipus complex«, and the plot has an unrealistic unambiguous finality, but often paradoxically with loose ends left dangling all over. Larp worlds formed on this base tends to lack substance, framework and inner logic. The borders are terribly narrow and forces players to restrain themselves in their thinking and acting, as they are in constant danger of stepping into white spots on the larp-worlds map. The result is a stale and uninspiring larp, which nevertheless still carries the potential of forming the players mind. It is a waste of both life and larp.

But the solution is, as usual, right at hand, in a more serious approach to creating fantasy-framework for

a larp. To put it frankly, the works of J.R.R. Tolkien should be our first, last and only resort if we aim to work within a fantasy-frame. I do not mean hereby, that there should be no scenario which is not a Middle-earth-scenario. My point is that in order to create fantasy- worlds of substance and profound qualities for a larp, one needs to use the Tolkien-method: The mythic method. The notion of the mythic method stems from the great modernist poet T.S.Eliot, and it implies that the poet does enormous research of literature, myth and history in order to make use of reference, allusion, metonymy and allegory (and yes, I know of Tolkiens negative approach to allegory. But it is nevertheless present in his works). This method facilitates an active remembrance from its audience as it draws upon ancient sources and symbols without restraining their interpretation in either time or historical context.

For those who has the strange urge to dismiss the works of Tolkien as romantic nonsense, I can add that the artistic, intellectual and creative values of the mythic method has been overmuch proved though the works of Tolkiens contemporaries, poets Ezra Pound and the before mentioned Eliot. Their works are prime examples of how the mythic method can lead the writer down narrative paths much darker and ambiguous than the one Tolkien chose. A writer such as Umberto Eco is, on the other hand,

a modern example of how mythic method can serve to give a more plot-orientated work both depth and entertainment value far beyond the works of cliché fantasy.

As a bit of a Tolkien-fundamentalist I cannot deny that I am biased in this argument, but it is my firm belief that if we are to create better and more pregnant frames for fantasy-larp, we need to deconstruct the fixed fantasy, return to the real world with all the imaginative products it consists of, and draws upon these sources to create new, fresh fantasy to suit and stimulate the time present. I it also necessary to stress that it is not easy to create a world. It is long time ago when six days of inspired labour was all that was needed. The fiction of the larp-world deserves as much thought and work and artistic sense (whatever that is) as any novel meant for publishing, and the standards ought to be as high as any publishers. It requires more than fascination of Dark Elves to write a world. The writer needs vision and knowledge, curiosity and creativity. And most of all, he/she needs the dualistic ability to reflect upon his/her creation from both an off-game and an in-game view. The recognition of the world as a construction is necessary at all times in order to maintain a healthy critical sense and not fall in love with ones own creation.

Return to the real

A final concluding remark must be

that certain factors have to be present if the fantasy-larp should be a space for generating new knowledge and profound understandings: Firstly, the participants need to be actively reflective of the part they play in constructing the simulated world as well as they must work with their larp-experiences beyond the space of the larp. Secondly, the fantasy-world of the larp must be original, thorough and carry more artistic value than what has been the usual standard. And above all, it has to be a conscious construction, where blind clichés are wiped out in favour of genuine inspirations from now, then, before and beyond.

To add a bit of illustration all the words and abstractions, I have personally experienced two examples of larp, where some or all of these elements have present –and have worked!

One is the Nemelego –scenarios of Aarhus-based larp-organization Einherjerne. The background of these three/four days-scenarios was so called »mythic middle-ages«, an original construction of elements from fairytale, mythology and fact-based history. In my experience, this gave participants enormous freedom as dogmatic stereotypes where somehow eliminated, and one seemed to start the larp from new, but somehow well-known ground. The other example is of quite another kind. It is the small Copenhagen-based larp-group of Tordenelverne.

The group is formed around a course which aims at building up children's resources through larp, and the fictive background is a combination of native American Indian shamanism and concept of fantasy elves. Both Nemeffregó and Tordenelverne are examples of how larp can avoid the danger of becoming an infertile escapism, but instead create a space of experience, education, remembrance and creativity. No big boy of modern cultural theory –or indeed anyone else- should scorn such a media.

Endnotes

¹ Walter Benjamin: Paris, Die Hauptstadt des XIX. Jahrhunderts“ in: „Das Passagenwerk“

² Remembrance and the practise of remembering is a very broad term within the field of cultural studies. I use the term as a definition of abstract socio-cultural memory; a sort of unconscious recognition of an original substantial content which transcends the presence of the remembered, and lends it a potential for a deeper understanding of the self within the socio-cultural spectre. Remembrance can thus be said to be the main factor in what we would in daily speech call a fulfilling and educational experience.

³ Jean Baudrillard: “The Evil Demon of Images and The Precession of Simulacre”, in: Thomas Docherty: “Postmodernism –a Reader”

⁴ »..das Veraltete.« (Walter Benjamin: Paris, Die Hauptstadt des XIX. Jahrhunderts« in: »Das Passagenwerk«, s. 47)