

From Bestiary onto Screen: Dragons in Film¹

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Introduction

Dragons loom large in the popular imaginative concept of the Middle Ages and its derivatives, the ‘pseudo-Middle-Ages’, found ever so often in ‘historical fantasy’ or ‘fantasy proper’.² This is not so much because dragons feature prominently in the literature of this era (romances, saint’s lives, epics),³ but rather because the popular knowledge of medieval literature is often limited to half a dozen prominent literary plots (e.g. the story of Siegfried/Sigurd, Beowulf, Arthur or, in an English context, St George), which are mistakenly believed to represent the literature of an entire era. Dragons play a prominent role in these selected texts and, due to its dramatic potential, the encounter between hero and dragon has been chosen frequently for illustrations. As a consequence, the epic/romance dragon has (rather undeservedly) developed into the ‘hallmark beast’ for the ‘popular’ Middle Ages.

I have added ‘undeservedly’ because the dragon from the *Saga of the Volsungs* (Fafnir) or from *Beowulf* is neither the most typical nor the most

¹ I would like to thank my colleague and film buff (and aficionado), Dirk Vanderbeke, who has read a draft of this paper and provided me with a plethora of helpful suggestions, not only, but predominantly in matters cinematic.

² See Honegger (forthcoming 2010b) on the question of the relationship between the ‘historical Middle Ages’ (assuming there existed something like that) and the fictional cultures loosely modelled upon them.

³ See Honegger (2009b) on dragons in medieval (and post-medieval) literature.

widespread of the medieval dragons. The dragon of the Apocalypse and his descendants in Christian religious literature and art would be of much greater relevance for a medieval audience. Indeed, as Christine Rauer has shown, even such an eminently ‘epic’ dragon as the one encountered in the second part of *Beowulf* is heavily informed by the saints’s lives tradition – and so is, for that matter, the dragon in the Middle English romance *Bevis of Hampton*.⁴ The secularized dragons encountered in the popular modern adaptations of medieval plotlines tell therefore less than half the original story.



Henry J. Ford was best known for his illustrations in Andrew Lang’s Rainbow Fairy books. He did this piece back in 1909.

[<http://diterlizzi.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2007/11/hjford.jpg>]

⁴ See Herzman et al., *Four Romances of England*. The dragon-fight episode runs from lines 2597-2910 and is strongly indebted to the hagiographical tradition.

The focus on the ‘epic’ dragon also neglects the important tradition of ‘natural historiography’,⁵ which discusses the dragon as an accepted part of the animal world. The medieval encyclopaedists, starting with Isidore of Seville, usually define the dragon as ‘the biggest of the snakes’. As Paul Michel (2009) has recently shown, scholarly investigation into the nature and existence of dragons was still a continuing concern in the eighteenth century, and the ‘demise’ of the medieval dragon in (pseudo) natural history was not permanent. The widely publicised discovery of fossilized dinosaur-skeletons in the first half of the 19th century,⁶ which coincided with the re-discovery of the Middle Ages as a literary theme (Tennyson et al.), resulted in an at least partial cross-fertilisation between the two species.⁷ It should come therefore as no surprise that we find, on the one hand, a ‘dinosaurification’ and, most recently, a re-claiming of the dragons for natural history, e.g. in the form of Dr. Drake’s *Dragonology* books. On the other, the popular imaginative representations of dinosaurs sometimes include characteristics typical of dragons (e.g. breathing fire or quadrupeds with wings).

In the following essay, I am going to pursue the trail of the dragon in selected 20th and 21st century films and discuss the changes and permutations reflected and sometimes initiated by the cinematic treatment of these creatures.

Die Nibelungen (1924)

Fritz Lang’s black-and-white silent film is one of the classic masterpieces of its era. The tragic story of Siegfried and the treasure of the Nibelungs is told with sparse but powerful images. Siegfried’s encounter with the dragon occurs in the first third of the film. Young Siegfried, leaving his foster-father Mime for Worms, is treacherously sent on the way that leads past the dragon’s lair.

⁵ I would like to place here, too, the dragons of the Physiologus/bestiary traditions.

⁶ See Mitchell for an in-depth discussion of the history of dinosaurs.

⁷ See Mitchell (1998: 88).

Siegfried, as soon as he catches sight of the worm, dismounts and attacks the beast with his sword. The action in the ensuing fight lies, for technical reasons, one-sidedly with the young hero who vigorously charges the dragon with his sword whereas the beast remains rather stationary and is little harmed by any of the blows. The end comes only when Siegfried manages to sink his weapon into the dragon's unprotected belly. The blood of the dying dragon gushes forth from the wound and when Siegfried accidentally tastes some of it, he realises that he is able to understand the speech of the nearby bird that advises him to bathe in the dragon's blood. The young warrior posits himself beneath the shelf from which the warm liquid is dripping and begins to sprinkle it onto his back (see still below). The dying dragon, maybe intentionally, hits with its tail a nearby tree from which a leaf falls onto Siegfried's back, thus causing the one spot between his shoulders to remain vulnerable to human weapons.



Picture of Siegfried bathing in the dragon's blood (from the 1924 movie *Die Nibelungen*).

It is, of course, a moot point to speculate about the original audience's knowledge of the story and their ability to fill in the unavoidable gaps in the plot.⁸ The film, as it stands, does not presuppose any pre-existing information on

⁸ Harald Reinl's version of the story (*Die Nibelungen* 1966) follows the same plot-line yet renders the sequence of events more coherent. Furthermore, the dragon Fafnir is

the part of the audience. The function of the dragon, then, is also independent of its original context in the story of Siegfried/Sigurd and the treasure of the Nibelungs. As such, the (in the film) nameless worm is an excellent example of what I called elsewhere (Honegger 2009b: 39) ‘the dragon as obstacle’. These worms have as their main (and sometimes only) *raison d’être* the function to provide the hero with a worthy opponent against whom he can pit his courage and strength. The original *Saga of the Volsungs*, by contrast, additionally motivates the encounter between Sigurd and Fafnir, and places it within the context of the treasure hunt. Lang’s film follows the alternative tradition of the *Nibelungelied*, which dissociates the killing of the dragon from the gaining of the treasure and makes good use of the technical limitations of early special effects. The stationary dragon neither obstructs Siegfried’s journey to Worms nor does he guard an ill-gotten treasure – it simply exists in his corner of the wood. Yet its mere existence posits a challenge to the hero, who needs no further motivation for attacking the beast than the fact that this is what heroes do. The advantage of becoming (almost totally) invulnerable to human weapons by bathing in the dragon’s blood is a mere (and unforeseen) side effect and does not diminish the purely ‘heroic’ quality of the deed.⁹ Although the worm has thus an important function on the level of plot (providing a reason for Siegfried’s invulnerability), and could also be seen as an embodiment of fate, which, in the end, cannot be conquered, it remains primarily an obstacle and challenge to the hero who is thus able to prove his mettle/quality.

presented as the guardian of the treasure and Siegfried’s attack is therefore differently motivated.

⁹ Uli Edel’s version of *Die Nibelungen* (2004) conflates the two traditions. Edel seemed uncomfortable with an unprovoked killing of the dragon and has thus Siegfried’s fight against the dragon Fafnir motivated by the hero’s altruistic desire to rid the people of this very mobile threat. Yet gaining the treasure and invulnerability are side effects of his victory over Fafnir also in this version.

The Lost World (1925)*¹⁰ and *King Kong (1933/1976/2005)

The Lost World, which came out only one year after Lang's *Die Nibelungen*, marks a considerable step forward in matters of special effects. Based on the novel by Arthur Conan Doyle, it tells a rescue-expedition's search for a missing scholar-explorer in the Amazonian rain forest. The would-be rescuers discover an isolated plateau on which otherwise extinct species have survived, most notably various kinds of dinosaurs. The film is important since it is the first to introduce the modern natural historical equivalents to medieval dragons. The relationship between herbivorous dinosaurs and predatory members of the species is characterised by violence and aggression, and even among carnivorous dinosaurs infighting is frequent. The overall impression is that of aggressive nature red in tooth and claw.¹¹

¹⁰ I won't discuss the 1988 remake of the movie since it does not contribute anything new to the topic.

¹¹ 'The Rite of Spring' section in Walt Disney's *Fantasia* (1940) paints a picture of a similarly aggressive and violent pre-historic dinosaur community.



Picture of two predatory dinosaurs fighting (from the 1925 movie *The Lost World*)

The dinosaur, or, more specifically, the most typical representative of the species in the eyes of the populace, the *Tyrannosaurus Rex*, makes a brief yet for our purpose crucial appearance in the 1933 movie *King Kong*. The ‘lost world’ scenario is invoked once more, though this time it is a mysterious island where the natives venerate a giant ape (Kong) as a deity – and sacrifice to him the beautiful blonde white woman (Ann Darrow) who has fallen into their hands. The setting and the imagery so far are strongly reminiscent of the story of Perseus and Andromeda – the woman/princess as the sacrificial victim to the monster. Kong, in the 1933 movie, furthermore comprises strong elements of the ‘black rapist’ figure, who wants to possess the white woman. His demise at the end of the movie signals the restoration of peace and (white) order and is generally greeted with relief. However, the fight between Kong and the marauding *Tyrannosaurus Rex* that threatens Ann could be read as an

iconographical foreshadowing of the structural re-definition of Kong's role as encountered in the later movies (1976, 2005).



Picture of King Kong fighting *Tyrannosaurus Rex* (from the 1933 movie *King Kong*)

A comparison between the still from the movie and the late 15th century depiction of St George fighting with the dragon on the left wing of the St George Altarpiece (Prague) renders the structural parallelism clearly visible. The ‘trinity’ of monster-dragon, victim-princess and hero-knight in the medieval painting corresponds quite closely, though, at first sight, maybe a bit surprisingly, to the ‘trinity’ of monster-dinosaur, victim-woman and hero-ape.



St. George and the Dragon, detail of the left wing, by the Master of the St. George's Altarpiece. Tempera, linden wood covered with canvas, 192 x 56.5cm. Prague, c. 1470. [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:St_George_and_the_Dragon-altar_wing-NG-Praha.jpg]

The deadly struggle between the two giants, which is merely a fight between two competing predators in the 1933 movie, is given new a meaning in the 1976 and 2005 versions. There the violent conflict highlights the ongoing structural re-definition of the giant ape's role – a process that has already started earlier on yet which now receives its confirmation. Kong is, in the end, undisputedly the (tragic) 'hero' of the 1976 and 2005 movies. These two films, in order to achieve the shift from 'monster' to 'tragic hero', employ a twofold strategy. Firstly, Kong is 'humanised' so that his actions can be easily interpreted within the parameters of human behaviour. Secondly, the functional space of 'the monster' that threatens the white woman (representing, in a symbolic rather than

naturalistic way, all that is desirable) is taken over by the *Tyrannosaurus Rex*.¹² This move makes sense because Kong's 'monstrosity' is merely based on his excessive size, which medieval romance usually associates with the giant; indeed, the great ape may be interpreted as the giant's modern equivalent: both transgress the respective norms due to their size. And yet a gigantic ape seems easier to fit into a modern audience's view of the world than a clearly human giant, whose very obvious humanity proves too much of a disturbing element. In a post-Freudian context, it may be less problematic to sympathise with a gigantic ape than with a gigantic man.

The dinosaur's 'monstrosity', on the other side, is augmented by additional elements. To start, the *Tyrannosaurus Rex* is no contemporary animal – its existence in our time and age, even if geographically limited, poses a violation of natural historical orthodoxy. Furthermore, the 'species gap' between monster and (human) audience is increased dramatically. With the great ape, the respective species were merely once removed (humans vs. ape), whereas with the dinosaur they are several times removed (humans vs. reptiles/birds). Last, and maybe most importantly, the *Tyrannosaurus Rex* functions as a modern-day incarnation of the 'dragon' archetype – which, structurally speaking, turns the great ape (at least in the 1976 and 2005 movies) into a somewhat unexpected counterpart of St George. Human heroes fighting dinosaurs-cum-dragons, by contrast, are rare – *One Million Years B.C.* (1966) being the probably best-known movie that presents such a brazen anachronism in a basically 'realistic' setting.

¹² Although Kong is shown defeating several 'monsters', among others a pterodactyl, it is his fight against the T-Rex that is of greatest importance.

Godzilla (1954)

The figure of the dinosaur-monster Godzilla¹³ entered the cinematic world first in 1954 and, apart from Roland Emmerich's 1998 movie, has remained a largely Japanese monster – with a world wide following, though. The first movie in the Godzilla series is of importance for our analysis since it combines the two seemingly divergent traditions of the 'natural historical dinosaur' and the 'mythical-legendary dragon'.¹⁴ The film opens with a series of mysterious and inexplicable disappearances of ships in the sea south of the Japanese main island Honshu. The audience merely witnesses an upsurge of the waters, ships that explode into flames, and then sink to the bottom of the sea. The rustic fishermen of a nearby island provide a first tentative explanation: discussing the strange events in the nearby waters and the disappearance of the fish, one of them recalls similar incidents in the past. He points out that in such cases the fishermen would select a maiden from the village, put her onto a raft and set her afloat as a sacrifice to appease the anger of the sea-deity. However, even the fishermen on the island are no longer in the 'mythic discourse universe' and the lingering memories of a mythic past serve but to prepare the ground for the new, composite discourse of the movie. Soon after this digression into folk memory, represented by an elderly fisherman, the natural historical discourse is introduced in form of a professor of palaeontology. The scholar visits the island where the monster wreaked havoc upon the small fishing village. While exploring the island and analysing the disturbingly big footprints, he chances to

¹³ According to Wikipedia, "*Gojira* (ゴジラ) is a combination of two Japanese words: *gorira* (ゴリラ *lit.* 'gorilla'), and *kujira* (鯨 (くじら) *lit.* 'whale'), which is fitting because in one planning stage, Godzilla was described as 'a cross between a gorilla and a whale'." The link to King Kong is thus implicitly present even in the name.

¹⁴ *Godzilla* (1954) was inspired by the American movie *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953). The 'beast', which is identified as a Rhedosaurus, comprises elements from various animals and shows several characteristics typical for dragons, yet it does not breathe fire.

run into the monster itself and we get finally a clear view of Godzilla – who then makes an escape into the sea. The ensuing official inquest presents numerous eyewitnesses, yet it is the professor's state-of-the art, slide-assisted lecture on his discoveries on the island that provides the natural historical and scientific framework into which we can place the monster. He argues that Godzilla is nothing but a dinosaur that has been disturbed by underwater explosions connected with the recent testing of atomic bombs.¹⁵ Godzilla is thus dissociated from the folk-tale tradition context of the fishermen and securely placed into the scholarly 'dinosaur' discourse that has risen to prominence since its inception in the 19th century. However, Godzilla itself seems to care little for academic respectability and natural historical categorisations. The beast continuously undercuts the scholarly discourse by showing off traits that do not fit the modern natural historical framework – and which make a maiden sacrifice look like not such a bad idea after all. Thus, Godzilla proves invulnerable to even the strongest conventional weapons – which would have blasted any 'normal' dinosaur back into the watery abyss from where it had emerged. The 'dragon' side comes fully to the fore when Godzilla attacks the coast of Honshu. An (unsuccessful) attempt is made to electrocute the beast, with the sole effect that the enraged Godzilla breathes fire,¹⁶ melts the pylons and sets the town afire – the dragon has gained the upper hand.

¹⁵ Tests with nuclear bombs were conducted in the vicinity of the Eniwetok- and Bikini-islands (part of the Marshall-Islands in the Pacific Ocean) from 1948 onwards. The idea that the test-explosions may affect the environment already occurred in *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*.

The pre-occupation with nuclear bombs and their effect is, of course, a direct result of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

¹⁶ Godzilla's fiery breath is later re-interpreted as 'atomic breath', i.e. a powerful heat ray of thermonuclear energy.



Godzilla breathing fire (from the 1954 movie *Godzilla*)



Godzilla's 'atomic breath' (from the 1954 movie *Godzilla*)

The end to the monster, however, comes not from the hand of a 'traditional' fearless knight figure. When everything else fails, a physicist, who had secretly constructed the dreaded ozone-bomb, sacrifices his own life (and thus conveniently takes the secret of the bomb into his wet grave) in the successful

attempt to destroy the monster. He thus atones for the misery that science has brought about in form of the nuclear bomb and Godzilla has been, at least temporarily,¹⁷ vanquished by science: all that remains of the beast is a skeleton at the bottom of the sea. This way the mythical monster has been successfully reduced to the state of its fellow-dinosaur, i.e. that of a ‘fossilised’ heap of bones. As such it is of interest merely to palaeontologists, and no longer poses a challenge and threat to the natural historical discourse.

The overall message of the film, however, relies on Godzilla’s ambiguous position between science and myth and exploits the symbolic-allegorical potential of the dragon-dinosaur. The historical context of the film suggests a strong influence by the prevailing atmosphere of insecurity and fear caused by the devastations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, by the Cold War, and the threat of modern (nuclear) weapons. Godzilla becomes the focus point for the people’s rational and irrational fears arising from this scenario. The storm, the tidal wave, the earthquakes, and also the firestorm caused by or accompanying Godzilla’s attacks on the fishing-village and the coastal town respectively, cannot but bring to mind the similar devastations caused by the atomic bomb. Furthermore, as much as nuclear power is the domain of natural sciences, it has ever since its discovery evoked irrational fears. Or, to put it in ‘Godzilla’ terms: to the man in the street, atomic power may look like a dinosaur, but one is never completely certain that it will not suddenly behave in a very un-dinosaur-like way and start breathing fire. Furthermore, the ozone-bomb that destroys Godzilla can be seen as an embodiment of the increasingly devastating weapons by means of which scientists tried to counter and top the nuclear menace during the era of the Cold War. Fortunately, the formula for the ozone-bomb perishes together with its inventor.

¹⁷ Although the ‘return’ of Godzilla is of no interest in this context, it adds yet another ‘mythic’ dimension to the monster.

The second movie of the Godzilla series (*Godzilla Raids Again*, 1955) introduces a new element that becomes a constituent part in many of the later films: Godzilla fighting against another monster – which, in the fifth film (*Ghidorah, the Three-Headed Monster*, 1964), brings about a shift similar to the one in *King Kong*: the ‘protagonist’ initially filling the ‘monster’-slot turns hero-protector against another creature, that takes over the role of monster-aggressor with its negative connotations.

The vacillation between the realms of natural history and legend gives rise to possible allegorical and symbolical interpretations and thus keeps the two traditions closely linked. Later on, however, we often find a dissociation of the two – with the possible exception of *Reign of Fire* (see Honegger forthcoming), where we encounter a post-modern play between the two seemingly mutually exclusive discourses that ends in the re-establishment of myth. The main trend, however, is characterised by the endeavour to separate the mythic ‘dragon discourse’ from the natural historical ‘dinosaur paradigm’ – with unforeseen results for the development of either species.

Dinomania reloaded: from the *Jurassic Park* trilogy to *Ice Age 3*

Jurassic Park (1993), *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (1997) and *Jurassic Park III* (2001) are prime examples for the continuation and development of the trend that started with the *Lost Worlds* movie in 1925: the fascination with the big, fierce and extinct dinosaurs.¹⁸ In these films we notice a shift away from the ‘(carnivorous) dinosaur as monster’ topos (and thus dragon-equivalent)¹⁹ towards a more differentiated view of these animals. *Jurassic Park III* contains a

¹⁸ Discussing the question why dinosaurs are so popular, Gould (1996: 223) writes: “I know no better response than the epitome proposed by a psychologist colleague: big, fierce, and extinct – in other words, alluringly scary, but sufficiently safe.”

¹⁹ Dragon-dinosaurs are found, for example, in *The Seventh Voyage of Sindbad* (1958) or *One Million Years B.C.* (1966).

brief sequence at the very opening of the film that may serve as a *mise en abîme* for this larger shift: the palaeontologist Dr. Alan Grant (Sam Neill) visits his former lover and palaeobotanist-colleague Dr. Ellie Sattler (Laura Dern), who is now happily married with two kids. He notices her three-year-old son playing in the sandpit with some plastic dinosaurs, pretending that they fight against each other. Joining the child, Grant takes a closer look at the plastic figures and points out (to a rather uncomprehending kid) that the two animals are herbivores and would thus be unlikely to go for each other's throat in reality. This short scene, apart from highlighting Grant's somewhat limited social skills (not only) with children, illustrates the opposition between the two dominant views on dinosaurs. On the one hand (represented by the child), we have the older 'symbolic' view of dinosaurs as dragon-like 'monsters'; this view is not concerned about natural historical accurateness. On the other hand (in the person of Dr. Grant), we have the 'new' natural historical approach, which pays no attention to what these animals may 'mean', but – at least initially – only what they 'are'. Yet even so new 'symbolic' (or rather 'allegorical') readings start to sneak in as soon as the dinosaurs leave the textbook-pages and occur in a 'narrative' context.

The development away from a 'symbolic' towards a more 'natural historical' view is also visible in the depiction of the carnivorous dinosaur par excellence, the *Tyrannosaurus Rex*. The first *Jurassic Park* movie still presents it as a bloodthirsty dangerous brute devouring everything that comes between its maws,²⁰ whereas the second film presents the T-Rex as 'responsible parents'. Their aggression is primarily aimed at those who mess with their offspring and, in the course of the movie, they turn from hunter to prey and have to be protected from being killed by big game hunters. Interestingly, the new 'big

²⁰ Luckily, it is mostly the bad guys who end up there and the T-Rex is used as a *deus ex machina*.

threat' to humans is no longer the big T-Rex – as long as one does not provoke its wrath, that is – but the smaller velociraptors.²¹ They are depicted as uncannily intelligent animals that communicate with each other and hunt in groups – characteristics that, together with their moderate size and erect posture, bring them into close vicinity of humans. They are, as Mitchell (1998: 2) has pointed out, no longer the 'monstrous Other' comfortably far removed from humanity, but in their resemblance the 'uncanny Other'.

Not all movies participate in this shift or, if they do, they modify the effect, as can be seen in the most recent, third instalment of the *Ice Age* film series, *Ice Age 3* or *The Dawn of the Dinosaurs*. The adventure is set in a 'lost world' scenario and begins with Sid's abduction by a female T-Rex, and thus starts out in a functional slot similar to that of Kong (and Sid as a rather unlikely equivalent to the White Woman). As becomes clear soon, the T-Rex is a single parent mother whose main concern is the welfare of her offspring,²² which takes up the primary theme of 'parenthood' introduced by the mammoth-couple Ellie and Manny. As with Kong, the caring beast is no longer a suitable cast for the role of the threatening monster. Yet whereas the tragic development in *King Kong* presupposes the double (and to the end incompatible) view of the great ape as 'monster' and 'lover-protector-hero', *Ice Age 3* avoids such (potentially tragic) ambiguity and replaces the mamma-T-Rex by Rudy, a gigantic albino Baryonyx dinosaur. We hear about this new monster from Buck, a slightly insane weasel, whom the companions met upon entering the lost world and who becomes their guide. Buck, ever since losing one eye in a fight against Rudy, has been pursuing the white dinosaur with insane hatred – Captain Ahab and

²¹ See Mitchell (1998: 102-09).

²² The epitome of this development is the Maiasaura, the 'good mother lizard' or 'mother earth lizard', which has come to represent the caring and 'politically correct' dinosaur. See Vanderbeke (2004: 186-91) on the changing 'image' of dinosaurs.

Moby Dick being the obvious inspiration for this unlikely couple. At the same time, however, there are echoes of the older topos of the knight-hero fighting the dragon-monster. Similar to the *Jurassic Park* movies, we have the ‘new bad guys’ also making an appearance. The equivalent to the velociraptors are here a pack of Guanlong that try to get at the helpless Ellie while she gives birth to her baby. Their aggression is neither motivated by parental instinct (T-Rex) nor ‘chivalric’ in the widest sense of the word (Rudy), but sneaky and cowardly – and they are therefore deservedly beaten.

Murderous monsters, cuddly dragons, and secret agents

The evolution of a ‘natural historical’ discourse, centring on dinosaurs, also affects the figure of the dragon. Some movies place it in close vicinity of the dinosaur, such as *George and the Dragon* (2004). Set in twelfth-century England, it tells tongue-in-cheek the story of the knight George (James Purefoy) endeavouring to rescue princess Lunna (Piper Perabo), who has been abducted by a dragon. Yet when George and his companions finally find Lunna in the dragon’s cave, she insists on taking along and protecting the (female) dragon’s egg – which, of course, brings about the pursuit by its anxious mother. The climactic finale not only sees Lunna rescued from her shady suitor Sir Garth (Patrick Swayze), but has also the baby-dragon hatch from the egg and the mother-beast arriving to claim her young. They finally retire into the depths of a lake (Loch Ness?) where, it is implied, they live on unmolested by knights and other people. This re-writing of the legend of St George, who does not kill the dragon but actually removes part of his father’s lance that got stuck in the side of the beast a long time ago, is an example of how legendary and mythical matter is re-interpreted and, in the process, reclaimed by the now dominant natural historical discourse. Dragons are, it is implied, the last representatives of

an almost extinct species and some may have survived in the remoter parts of our world, such as the famous Loch Ness.

Some films, however, do not try to re-write the older legends or render the dragons compatible with the tenets of natural science. *Dragonslayer* (1981), for instance, gives his audience a very traditional dragon that must be appeased by regular sacrifices of virgins. Its end does not come from the hand of a knight, but from an apprentice wizard; and the ‘disappearance’ of the (last?) dragon is connected to the arrival and spread of Christianity and the ensuing demise of the older ‘magic’.

Yet the greatest threat to dragons is, in my mind, neither allegorical interpretation within a Christian framework, nor the dominance of the natural historical discourse, nor the loss of a magical view of the world that often goes hand in hand with the secularisation, but rather the neotonisation²³ and disnification²⁴ of dragons. Ever since Kenneth Grahame’s tale *The Reluctant Dragon* (originally published 1898), modern audiences have been familiar with the somewhat odd but completely harmless and likeable dragon²⁵ that suffers from popular prejudices against its race. In *The Reluctant Dragon* (1941), Walt Disney Studios turned Grahame’s story into an animated film that comprises the climax of a feature-length movie providing a humorous and informative tour to the Disney Studios. The process of neotonisation, which is typical for most of Disney’s animated films (and an important element in the overall disnification),

²³ Neotonisation is the process of juvenilization, i.e. the retention, by adults in a species, of traits previously seen only in juveniles.

²⁴ Baker (2001: 174) defines ‘disnification’ as “to render [the animal] stupid by rendering it visual.” I use the term slightly differently as an umbrella term to cover the various alterations (such as neotonisation, humanisation, clarification of lines, colours and textures etc.) involved in adapting animals for a Disney cartoon.

²⁵ Michael Ende’s luck-dragon Falkor (‘Fuchur’ in the German original) in his *The Neverending Story* (*Die Unendliche Geschichte*, 1979) is probably the best-known of this new breed of dragons.

is illustrated by means of a visit to a drawing class in the Disney Studios. The ‘model’ is a live elephant and the audience witnesses the step-by-step neotonisation cum disnification of the originally neither very cuddly nor expressive elephant. The drawings of the animal provide it with a pronounced facial expression, show exaggeratedly large eyes and plumb curves and in general strive to live up to the ‘Kindchenschema’ (see illustration below). The fact that the viewer is allowed, even forced, to take a look behind the scenes and to witness the transformation of real-life elephant into cartoon should prepare us for what is to come.



Example of neotonisation as part of the disnification of the elephant
[http://www.hellokids.com/c_5171/coloring/disney-coloring-pages/tarzan-coloring-pages/tarzan-and-tchita-on-the-elephant]

The first encounter with the dragon is, in spite of the preparation by means of the aforementioned episode, a bit of a surprise. The beast does not only fail completely to act like a dragon (which would be still in keeping with Grahame’s original characterisation), but it also has greater similarities with an overgrown fat ant than a member of the species *draco* (which is neither in keeping with Grahame’s original characterisation nor with Ernest Shepard’s illustrations of

1939). Disney not only neotenisises the dragon, but also effeminizes the beast, so that Grahame's clearly male dragon becomes a somewhat odd travesty, if not exactly a transvestite, in this respect, too.



Drawing of the 'reluctant dragon' showing clearly the effects of neotenisisation. Interestingly, the 'arrowhead-tail' is clearly visible and survived all changes.
[<http://animationguildblog.blogspot.com/2009/01/mega-collectors-reluctant-dragon.html>]



The large eyes, smooth skin and pronounced eyelashes as well as the gestures and general way of moving and speaking 'effeminize' the dragon in Disney's animated film (enlarged detail from DVD cover picture).

[<http://blog.newsok.com/bamsblog/files/2009/05/disney-animated-classics-reluctant-dragon3.jpg>]

This process of ‘alienation’ and ‘emptying’ is further aggravated and pushed to extremes by the accompanying merchandising products. They may start out with a link to the original context, yet in the end the figure of the neotenised dragon is often completely dissociated from its original characteristics so that the empty shell can be re-used in frameworks completely unrelated or even contradictory to the original ones.

A most recent and, to my mind, striking example is the use of a neotenised dragon figure in the advertisement campaign of the moist toilet tissue brand ‘Lilliputz’.



Advertisement for the wet toilet tissue brand ‘Lilliputz’.
[Rossmann product catalogue July 09]

The cuddly being depicted has been emptied completely of all the cultural meanings associated with the dragon and thus finds its ‘logical’ place next to the equally de-naturalised teddy bear. This transformation by disnification, as I have already pointed out in Honegger (2009b: 35), may have provided the original

inspiration for Monty Python's infamous 'Killer Rabbit' episode in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.



The deceptively innocuous-looking killer rabbit in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.
[http://carpefactum.typepad.com/photos/uncategorized/2007/07/30/killer_rabbit.jpg]

The rabbit is, next to the lamb, usually seen as the most innocuous of animals. Monty Python's decision to give it the place and function traditionally assigned to the dragon is not only part of their overall strategy of inverting the expectations held by the audience, but it is also a comment on the cultural treatment of the dragon. The disnification of the 'Reluctant Dragon's' offspring has indeed moved the popular perception of dragons far into the direction of the 'cuddly animal' – and thus the rabbit. Monty Python take things one step further and replace the dragon (aka 'the monster') by a rabbit proper; yet, at the same time, they equip the product of this transmogrification process with some of the dragon's original ferocity and dangerousness and thus highlight the discrepancy of 'original nature' and current depiction. The Killer Rabbit as well as the Reluctant Dragon thus illustrate that animals are often no longer carriers of predictable meanings but signifiers without clearly assigned characteristics.

The situation for the dragons of fantasy, then, is quite different. Although the settings of many fantasy-novels comprise ‘medieval’ or ‘medievalising’ elements, they make no claim to historical truthfulness or similitude and are thus free to ignore or even oppose the dominant natural historical discourse. The dragon as opponent to the hero-knight in all its variations is alive and kicking²⁶ and often nothing but a direct continuation of the stock-element found in medieval and medievalising romances. However, in modern fantasy we also encounter the new concept of the ‘dragon as protagonist/character’. This may be due either to contact with the Far East and its concept of ‘dragon’,²⁷ or it could as well be an autochthonous development harking back to the mythic and allegorical dragons in Germanic epic (e.g. Fafnir) and saints’ lives. Some of these creatures are humans transformed (Fafnir) or devils, if not Satan himself. As such, they possess a more than bestial intelligence and the ability to speak. Based upon these models, the intelligent, speaking dragon becomes an important protagonist in many a fantasy novel and, subsequently, film. Saphira in *Eragon* (2006) is a recent example, though her personality is only poorly developed and reminded me of an above-average intelligent (flying) horse rather than a fully rounded persona. Draco, the wise and witty dragon in *Dragonheart* (1996), comes closer to what one would expect from a dragon-personality – and not only because he speaks with the voice of Sean Connery! However, we must still wait for a year or two until the greatest dragon-personality of all makes its appearance on screen: Smaug the Golden in the movie-adaptation of J.R.R.

²⁶ See *Merlin and the War of the Dragons* (2008) or *Fire and Ice: The Dragon Chronicles* (2009).

²⁷ See Zhao (1992) and the relevant contributions in Chen and Honegger (2009). Interestingly, Ende’s ‘evil western dragon’ ‘Frau Mahlzahl’ (in *Jim Knopf*, 1960) is transformed into a wise and benevolent golden ‘eastern’ dragon once they have reached the city of Ping (i.e. Beijing).

Tolkien's *The Hobbit*.²⁸ Smaug, more than any dragons before him, embodies the prime qualities of the original and undiluted *draco*: in- and superhuman intelligence, ancient lore, sharp wit, greed, wrath, cunning, and malice – all packed into one single powerful and awe-inspiring personality. If the movie follows the novel in its depiction of this dragon, then we can look forward to an experience which hopefully brings home the *tremendum et fascinosum* of the original encounter with the dragon.

Some concluding remarks

Dragons have featured in movies from a very early point in time onwards. Their depiction, function, and transmutations on screen reflect similar developments in literature and (popular) art. On the one hand, the neotenisation and disnification of the originally awe-inspiring *draco ferox* have brought about not only a 'dwindling' process but also the loss of its original characteristics. As a result, we find ourselves face to snout with a cuddly and entirely innocuous animal, the mythical equivalent of the teddy bear, so to speak. Monty Python's Killer Rabbit may be seen as a perceptive comment on this development. On the other hand, we find the dragons claimed by the (pseudo-) natural historical discourse – which gave rise to the popular *Dragonology* book series by Dr. Ernest Drake. Both developments pose a severe threat to the (literary and cinematic) survival of the original *draco ferox* as we find it in *The Saga of the Volsungs*, but it is to be hoped that the depiction of Smaug in *The Hobbit* film will live up to its literary model and set new standards. Even though the wheel of time cannot be turned backwards and the infamies brought onto the dragons' heads by Disney and Co. cannot be undone, a new generation will grow up who,

²⁸ See Petty (2008: 45-61) and Honegger (2009b: 45-49) for an analysis of Smaug as a literary character.

although they still wipe their backsides with *Lilliputz*, they will at least know that dragons such as Smaug have kept their dignity even in modern times.

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Filmography

- The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953; directed by Eugène Lourié).
- Dragonheart* (1996; directed by Rob Cohen).
- Dragonslayer* (1981; directed by Matthew Robbins).
- Eragon* (2006; directed by Stefen Fangmeier).
- Fantasia* (1940; produced by Walt Disney).
- Fire and Ice: The Dragon Chronicles* (2009; directed by Pitof).
- George and the Dragon* (2004; directed by Tom Reeve).
- Jurassic Park 1-3* (1993, 1997, 2001; directed by Steven Spielberg [1-2] and Joe Johnston [3]).
- King Kong* (1933; directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack).
- King Kong* (1976; directed by John Guillermin).
- King Kong* (2005; directed by Peter Jackson).
- The Lost World* (1925; directed by Harry Hoyt).
- The Lost World* (1988; directed by Bob Keen).
- Merlin and the War of the Dragons* (2008; directed by Mark Atkins).
- Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975; directed by Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones).
- Die Nibelungen* (1924; directed by Fritz Lang).
- Die Nibelungen* (1966; directed by Harald Reinl).
- Die Nibelungen* (2004; directed by Uli Edel).
- One Million Years B.C.* (1966; directed by Don Chaffey).
- Reign of Fire* (2002; directed by Rob Bowman).
- The Reluctant Dragon* (1941; directed by Alfred Werker).
- The Seventh Voyage of Sindbad* (1958; directed by Nathan H. Juran).