

IN PRODUCTION THE CONFRATERNITY OF NEOFLAGELLANTS

Neil Mulholland, Torsten
Lauschmann, Alex Pollard and

Norman Hogg: Why is the medieval period said to be analogous with postmodern, postcolonial or globalised society? Why do people find this transhistorical approach to interpreting the present so compelling at this precise moment in time?

Torsten Lauschmann: To answer the question I think you would have to ask 'could it apply to any other period just as well?' Could it apply to the renaissance? What makes medieval times so different in terms of themes in contemporary culture? What does it say about the person who tries to find the links between now and then?

Alex Pollard: In terms of visual art, you might think about artists who are using an unusual set of representations to do something outside of established discourses. For example there's a lot of art that references a certain period of modernism – that's a very established cultural conversation. I think that if you look at a lot of Romantic art, or the New Romantics, there's a different idea of accelerating *backwards* rather than forwards.

NH: Why is the fascination with stopping at the medieval rather than with say, ancient Rome

TL: That's already a well-trodden path, just like modernism. Maybe it's fashion. Maybe it's the overlooked.

AP: I was on style.com looking at the fashion designers and collections and half of the shows mentioned the Arts & Crafts Movement and Romanticism; Alexander Wang, people like that. They were all stepping back into this. Someone on the site said they were sick of references to modernism in runway shows. I thought this was fascinating because that's how I feel about art. There's this mythic thing that comes

into the neomedieval in terms of things you would associate with 'irrational' subject matters. In the 80s, transavantgarde painters were reopening those mythic angles into their work after years of puritanism.

Neil Mulholland: It's a shift from one set of stories to another. The stories that people associate with the medieval era are folk tales that were the staple of an oral tradition handed down. It seems less authoritarian than a set of edicts that are supposed to tell artists in what direction they should be going. One of the ideas that the medieval can encompass, whether or not this is true of the era, is the idea that it has more space to play in, that there's less of a sense of a single authority. So, is this a pilgrimage? Are artists looking at the medieval in its historical context or is it just material to riff off from? On the one hand we can have a medieval that was a time of rigid feudal hierarchy, set in its ways. But then it's also a time when there was great pestilence that swept away these structures – in their place came a new kind of disorder. So the medieval is whatever you want it to be.

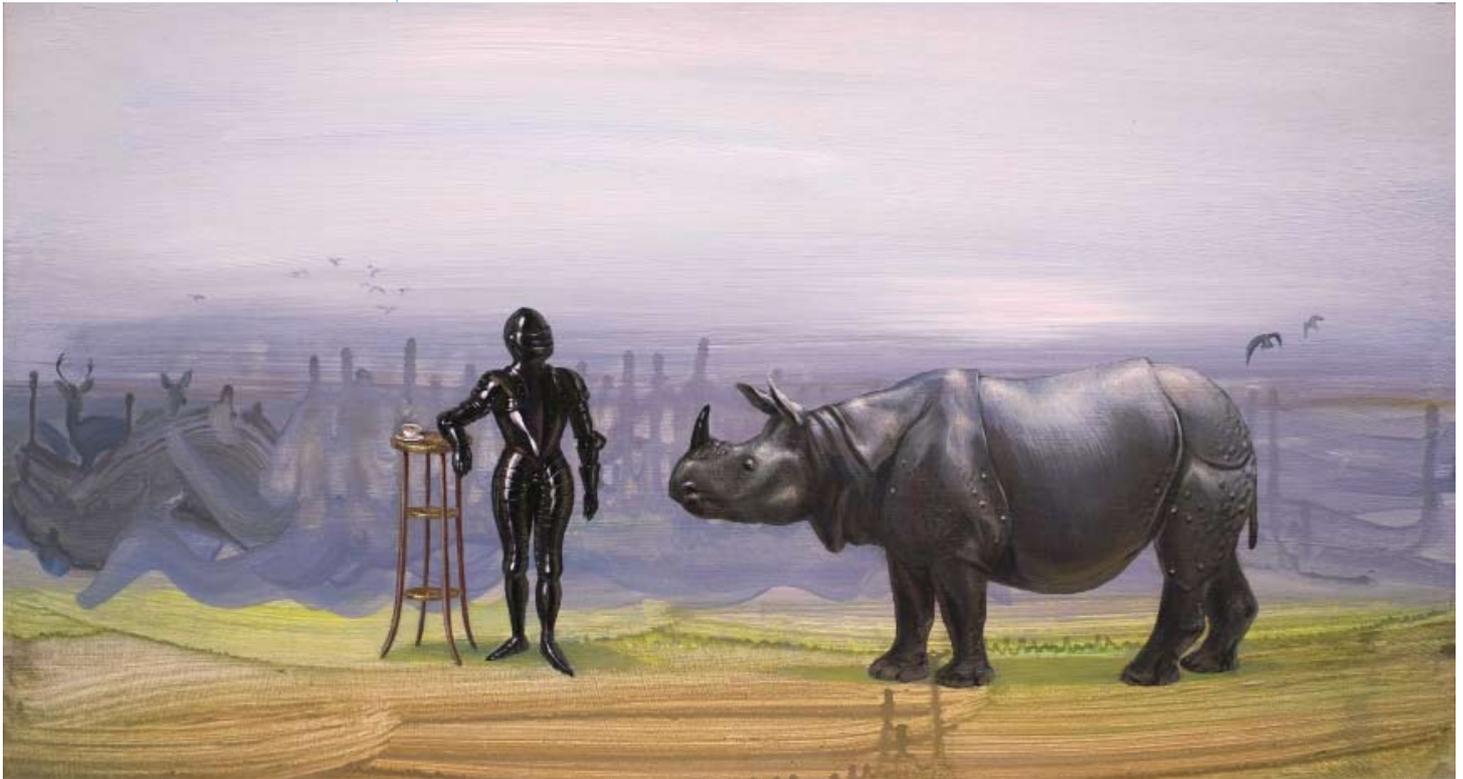
TL: Because I like reading these history books by Fernand Braudel, what interests me is the everyday life. What got me hooked was reading about how you bake the bread, how you drunk you get. I work from that rather than from images. My images of medieval times are so distorted that I don't think I could use them. For me it's more about the historical source. That's why I will go back to historical texts which try to be accurate, because it's such a clouded time. You can to easily substitute it with utopia; it's one of those places.

AP: It's that Golden Age idea which also has a relationship with Romanticism, a nostalgia coming in during a period of glum industrialisation. Now it's a digital form of industrialisation. Perhaps it's got something to do with community. A lot of the work that I see has a genuine engagement with scenarios

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COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SORCHA DALLAS GLASGOW



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for communities to happen; it's an abrasive strategy towards Thatcherite ideas of individualism.

NM: There was a period in the 1990s when much British art was based on artists looking only as far back at their childhoods. The medieval seems to be completely disconnected from this kind of personal experience. Is this the case?

TL: I was definitely, as an adolescent, into bands like *Dead Can Dance*, bands that were adopted by Goth.

NM: Goth has stuck around since. It's got bigger and bigger.

TL: It's a strong subculture that's lasted throughout.

AP: One key thing with our generation is that we spent a lot of time on neomedieval games, like RPG.

NM: Norman has been looking at The Long Now Foundation [www.longnow.org]. Its endeavour is to 'creatively foster long-term thinking and responsibility in the framework of the next 10,000 years'.

NH: It is a reaction to what Alex was talking about how people always refer back to modernism, which, on this scale, would just be a few seconds ago.

NM: In the 1990s this element was about going back to a Golden Age, it was infantile, about reclaiming childhood. Nostalgia is based on this as an industry. The neomedieval seems to be more concerned with a play space. Historians of the medieval have a real problem with this.

NH: This is something intrinsic to medieval studies itself. It's self-ghettoised; they want to protect the subject from these distortions. At the same time they were very late in applying new methods of critical theory because they saw this as a way of looking at

things now that should not be applied to ancient texts. I think it's changing now, branching off into cultural studies, and looking at the effects that the medieval has in games and film. The question I have is do we really need to have this separation between rigorous academic investigation into the period and the more fantastical notions – whether it be the Dark Ages and apocalypse or a rural idyll?

NM: Robin Hood? King Arthur?

NH: My idea is that the neomedieval is a mixture of both of these aspects and maybe neither of them is more 'real' than the other. Or do we need to be asking this question at all?

TL: Believability changed from then to now. What was authenticity then was different to what we call authenticity. I do think it's important that any discussion on the subject has to recognise the attempt, even if it's faulty, by historical method of using only existing documents. That's a basis you have to accept. But it doesn't cut out any of the less academic approaches.

AP: Maybe it's also a key part of being alive to have fictions within history?

TL: There's a danger of that with any period. Let's say talking about 1939–45 in 2,000 years time: there has to be an attempt to figure fact, even although this can still generate faults mistakes, misconceptions, misreadings.

AP: The perpetually present scenario we have now, with access to all cultural genres, is for me a wave of information that makes fictionalised pasts more plausible.

NM: A lot of work recently tries to engage with this

in a 'live' way. Re-enactment is one way, a pilgrimage, but there's also the idea of appropriating medieval structures, rituals and rites.

AP: The ritual element is interesting because it opens up the idea that what you're attempting to do isn't new, that you're going through a ceremony. That opens up different areas to ones that would have been explored during a modern period, a different attitude.

TL: So you think it's the final end of modernity then? Modernity, postmodernity... neomedievalism?

AP: Not exactly. Stepping into archetypes becomes a positive thing rather than a problem. Why

bother trying to search for new form? Maybe new form isn't relevant to our generation? That's what Alexander Wang's next collection is going to be.

TL: Witnessing art in the last 5-10 years there's more of a sense of this. It might be quite particular to work happening in Scotland or in Glasgow. Maybe it's a move back to a traditionalism in terms of art, in terms of presenting art, in terms of subjects and materials.

NH: This puts neomedievalism in a position where it's always going back. I'm wondering if we can talk about the neomedieval looking forward?

AP: There are different strands aren't there? One thing I think about Torsten's work is that, while he has one eye on the past, he's always thinking about embracing new technology and its possibilities. I find this a really fascinating part of your work.

TL: For me it's looking at invention and seeing that there's no positive or negative attached to invention; it is instead a concern with how it's being used. There's therefore no point to technophobia. I find it highly problematic; playing the lute versus the laptop – that discussion is still going on!

AP: I don't see neomedievalism to be connected with neoconservatism – it's much more to do with the way that the world moves, for me much more like a rhizome. It's his key to work with that context.

NM: Neoconservatism is good at generating folk devils. Monsterdom was big in the medieval era, a normal part of the fabric of life.

NH: The way they wrote their own history back then they could put these things in – 'who's to say that these beasts don't exist?' As the boundaries of trade progressed they kept finding that these things actually didn't exist. They never came across them in China. The Chinese thought that the beasts lived in Europe...

AP: I suppose it's to do with not knowing, the dark sublime. Not knowing is key to the magic of T and O maps. People look at this material again for that reason, because it does have a form of magic in it.

TL: Paul Wegener's German Expressionistic film *Der Golem* (1920) is really an important aspect of neomedieval monsterdom in this sense. The Golem is not related to modernity, the set is a mud village. You can still see the 1920s in Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920) however.

NM: Monsterdom is connected to our increasingly digitised augmented reality. Christians experienced the world as a mirage. Early painting depicts heaven as 'real', the corporeal as unreal. It's an inversion of our what we might regard as our representational hierarchy. As digital culture makes our world more augmented, we move, perhaps, back into something more like this medieval mind space.

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COURTESY THE ARTIST

TL: I'm doing a project on augmented reality [with Informatics at the University of Edinburgh]. There's a world that's neither real nor fiction, but somewhere in between.

NM: Coming back to *The Long Now*, if people look back on the 2010s are they going to be looking at the Cathedral or the Bazaar? This is a bit like saying if we can, now, talk about 'British' medieval art, a great canon of famous illuminated manuscripts and holy relics? When I think about the medieval I don't think about this at all, I think about the folk culture and the rituals that have been passed down to us. When others look back on now what will they see? Will they see a collection of things or will they see structures that are passed on?

TL: Historians will go through people's Facebook pages?

NM: We can't be sure they can all be archived. Even though a cathedral is a material entity, it's made by lots of people whose individual endeavour maybe goes unnoticed. So it's not entirely hierarchical, it's a collective endeavour. The bazaar allows for an even greater social fluidity, but it leaves no trace, no material evidence. This effects how people in the future will see us.

AP: That's a really tough question.

TL: That's not the job of the artist though. This is exactly the core isn't it? It has to make sense; it has to be totally significant in this moment. That's the motivation behind creativity.

AP: What about value? Problems in an art discourse are intertwined with a wider discourse. This makes you wonder, 'what has value'? It isn't just fads. Personally, I think there is a notion of pop preserved within the neomedieval.

TL: Your shoes? [ref to Alex Pollard's sculpture Chic]

NM: Minstrels and jesters are proto-pop, a sediment or stock for industrial popular culture. Thinking in these long terms is another way of thinking about the middle ages; that we're 'in the middle'. Pop culture hasn't run it's ground necessarily; it's just becoming something different. Maybe this difference has already happened and we have quite noticed. Pop will have a different value in its new form. Things are always in the middle – we are always in the middle of our age. There is no dark passage.

NH: 'Nasty, brutish and short.'

TL: Maybe it's like Cologne – it had its fabulous time, then it moved to Berlin. In the medieval era Islam was flourishing.

NM: There was a global market system at the turn of the 14th century that wasn't dominated by Europe. The Islamic world was a key part of that. It made the advances in mathematics and philosophy.

NH: Scholasticism was an attempt to incorporate 'pagan', or anti-Christian ideas into the Christian faith.

NM: And yet, the new medievalism is often connected with fundamentalist millenarianism.

NH: It's a mixture of this and the idea of the dark ages being the end of civilisation.



NM: The end of history. The end of time.

TL: We live in a society of anxiety – that's how medieval times have been portrayed. That's the link.

AP: There is a lot of *fin de siècle* around. There are many shows with the word 'dark' in the title. Lots of Armageddon movies.

NH: Many of them have a chivalric element. There's always the hero, someone who carries on the idea of civilisation. Maybe the middle ages are a salve? Done it before; got through it.

Torsten Lauschmann, Alex Pollard, Andro Semeiko, Ewan Sinclair, Emma Tolmie, David Osbaldeston and Plastique Fantastique are exhibiting in Avalon at The Embassy, curated by Norman Hogg and Neil Mulholland for the Edinburgh Annuale, 18th of June to the 11th of July 2010

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