The Twenty-first Century Wonderland and What a Reader Finds There: Mytho-Geo-Graphical Landscape of Brian Talbot's *Alice in Sunderland*

Mária Kiššová*

Univerzita Konštatina Filozofa v Nitre

ÖZET Bu araştırma, Bryan Talbot tarafından yapılmış olan *Alice in Sunderland* (2007) adlı grafik çalışma ile ilgilidir. Araştırmada, eserde yer alan metinlerarası bağlar kurma ve anlatı-üstü yapılar yaratma gibi belirli özellikler ele alınmaktadır. Yarı belgesel olma özelliğine sahip olan bir metin gibi de okunabilmesine karşın, *Alice in Sunderland*'da yazarın eserini mitolojik özelliklerden arındırma çabası aşikardır. Eserde, her ne kadar gerçek dünyadaki gerçekliklere göndermede bulunan çok sayıda unsur bulunsa da, okurlara sürekli olarak, eserin sadece bir "yaratcı bir ürün" olduğu ya da düş gücüyle oluşturulduğu hatırlatılmaktadır. Bunu gerçekleştirebilmek amacıyla, Talbot, içinde düşsel deneyimlerin yer aldığı iki ayrı dünyanın yansıtıldığı çift yönlü bir çerçeve oluşturmuştur: tek-kişilik bir tiyatro oyunu ile bir düş. Bu tür stratejiler, aslında, Alice kitaplarının, çocukların eğlendirilmesine yönelik olan özgün işlevine işaret etmekte; böylelikle de, dikkatlerin, ikincil ya da postmodernizmi yansıtan referans çalışmaları yerine, özgün metinler üzerinde yoğunlaştırılmasını sağlamaktadır. Ancak, bu araştırmanın temel inceleme noktası, her ne kadar özgün metnin değerinin yeniden vurgulanması eğilimi öne çıksa da; Talbot'un, bu eseri tümüyle postmodern çerçevede kalmaktadır ve bu tür eserlerde öne çıkan sorgulama ontolojisinin, şüphecilik ve görecelilik söylemlerinin çerçevelerinin dışına çıkmamaktadır.

ANAHTAR KELİMELER Lewis Carroll, yorum, temsiliyet, gerçeklik, rüya, metinlerüstülük

ABSTRACT The paper focuses on a graphic work *Alice in Sunderland* (2007) by Bryan Talbot. The interpretation includes selected aspects of the work such as intertextual links and metanarrative devices. Though *Alice in Sunderland* can be read as a semi-document, author's attempt to demythologize his subject is apparent. The readers are constantly reminded that this is only 'a creative work', a work of imagination, a construct-regardless how many facts and references to the 'real' world it contains. To achieve this, Talbot has chosen to 'double-frame' the text with two realms of illusionary experience: a theatre performance (a one-man show) and a dream. These strategies point at the original function of the Alice books as entertaining stories for children and in this way they also shift an emphasis on the original text instead of on secondary or referential work which is typical for postmodernism. However, the main argument of the paper is that in spite of the tendency to 'reestablish' the value of the original text, Talbot's project remains fully within the postmodern framework and it does not outstep the ontology of questioning, doubt and relativism prominent in such discourse.

KEYWORDS Lewis Carroll, interpretation, representation, reality, dream, metafiction

> *"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"*
>
> *"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,"* said the Cat.
>
> *"I don't much care where-"* said Alice.
>
> *"Then it doesn't matter which way you go,"* said the Cat.
>
> *"-so long as I get somewhere,"* Alice added as an explanation.
>
> *"Oh, you're sure to do that,"* said the Cat, *"if you only walk enough"* (Carroll 1981, 88).

> *"Theatre consists in this: in making live representations of reported or invented happenings between human beings, and doing so with a view to entertainment"* (Brecht 1964, 180).

INTRODUCTION

Ever since *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* were first published in 1865 and 1871, the books have become not only the paragons of the golden age of the 19th century children's literature but we may undoubtedly say that they have played a significant role in shaping the Western imagination and culture. Today, the Alice books are the textual representation of nonsense and major texts of reference when the issues of absurdity, irrationality and subversion are discussed in different contexts and discourses. The books have enchanted dozens of illustrators[1] and visual artists, directors, web and fashion designers,[2] philosophers, literary scholars, mathematicians, historians, and linguists, thanks to which Lewis Carroll turned into the second most quoted author after Shakespeare. There are very few works in western

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1. The list of illustrators includes Arthur Rackham (1907), Mervyn Peake (1946), Salvador Dali (1969), Max Ernst (1970), Anthony Brown (1988), and Dusan Kallay (1991). Recent works directly related to Alice include the 1999 edition for children with illustrations of Helen Oxenbury which received the 2001 Kate Greenaway Medal and was described by the *Guardian* as '[a]n Alice for the new Millenium' (see http://www.carnegiegreenaway.org.uk/greenaway/recent_winners.php); a pornographic graphic novel by Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie *Lost Girls* (1991-1992, 2006) based on sexual escapades of Alice, Dorothy Gale (*The Wizard of Oz*) and Wendy Darling (*Peter Pan*); or Tim Burton's cross-generational movie (2010) with Johnny Depp as The Hatter. Alan Moore, A. and Melinda Gebbie, *Lost Girls*, 1/3 (Marrietta: Top Shelf Production, 2006).
2. See for example: Cyril Foiret. "Alice in Wonderland by Annie Leibovitz", http://trendland.com/alice-in-wonderland-by-annie-leibovitz/, (15 August 2012).

literary tradition which have been adapted, parodied and retold so many times, and, unsurprisingly, Lewis Carroll's works have also found their way to Harold Bloom's often discussed The Western Canon. These stories are so universal that we may truly say that several 'versions of Alice' coexist in western imagination. Paradoxically, as a result of the 20th century media culture, the version of Alice which is most well-known – and an image of Alice that comes to most people's mind - is the 1951 Disney version.[3]

In this context, the analysed graphic work by Brian Talbot *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment* (2007) can be seen as part of a long tradition and suggests the timeless relevance and imaginative power of the original text.[4] The present paper discusses 'what happens to Alice' in Talbot's version; or, in different words, how this graphic text which refers directly to Carroll's story operates within the postmodern literary framework. Argumentation in the present paper is related to Talbot's framing of the narrative as a dream and a theatrical performance. This double-illusionary concept serves as a major metafictional device in the text and accentuates its reading and interpretation as a post-modern narrative. We claim that this strategy – first and foremost – evokes playfulness (the title itself contains the word 'entertainment'). The paper thus proposes that emphasizing this aspect, Talbot alludes ironically to the modern rendering of Alice as a text which is more often *mentioned* and referred to rather than *read*. In this perspective, *Alice in Sunderland* is seen as an attempt to 'reestablish' *Alice in Wonderland* as a fiction whose first function is to entertain and offer genuine reader's experience. However, the main argument of the paper is that in spite of the tendency to 'reestablish' the value of the original text, Talbot's project remains fully within the postmodern framework and it does not outstep the ontology of questioning, doubt and relativism prominent in such discourse.

BRYAN TALBOT AND *ALICE IN SUNDERLAND*

Bryan Talbot is one of the major representatives of contemporary British graphic and cartoon production. Before the success of *Alice in Sunderland*, he had been already a well-known author of *Luther Arkwright* comic strip, an apocalyptic sci-fi based on the existence of parallel universes.[5] Recent publications by Talbot include *Grandville*, a

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3. Interestingly for the context of *Alice in Sunderland*, *Alice's Wonderland* - an early Disney version of 1923 - mixes real characters with animated ones. Here, Alice visits the cartoon studio and in her dream she enters the Cartoonland in which animated characters turn alive.
4. Brian Talbot, *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007).

graphic novel series (the first part published in 2009) which is a mixture of alternative history, thriller and steampunk; and *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment*, a complex graphic work which explores the links between Lewis Carroll, his Alice's books and the Sunderland area in England, which is also the birthplace of Bryan Talbot.

Alice in Sunderland is an elaborate work which makes use not only of the Alice pretext, but also provides the background information about the original story, its addressee Alice Liddell, and presents an alluring personality of Lewis Carroll, a.k.a. Charles Dodgson. *Alice in Sunderland* can be analysed in many ways: as an attempt for a biographical portrayal of Lewis Carroll, as a graphic work which employs specific functions and fusions of illustrative styles, or as an experimentation with the text and illustrations. Yet, it is evident that Talbot's work clearly aims to demystify Carroll, often known only through sensational and stereotypical depictions as a shy Oxford mathematician, a photographer with keen interest in little girls, an amateur magician and a children's author.[6] There are obvious associations between Carroll, his work and visual art which 'justify' the use of the Alice story in a graphic format that is based on the intense, elaborate and multilayered interplay of the verbal and pictorial. First, Carroll's pursuits, literary works and hobbies were closely related to visual art; drawing and photography being his foremost affections.[7] However, it is a well-known fact that being dissatisfied with his own illustrations for *Alice's Adventures*, Carroll turned towards the cooperation with John Tenniel whose versions of Alice have now become classic. The beginning of *Alice's Adventures* is also notorious. She is sitting with her sisters on the river bank and simply gets bored. There is a book, but it does not contain any illustrations nor dialogue: "'And what is the use of a book,' thought Alice, 'without pictures or conversations?'."[8] In this sense, Talbot's work - as a collection of comic strips - is *the* book for Alice.

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5. The strip first appeared in the mid-1970s, was finished in the 1980s and published as a graphic novel and later, in 2006, as a webcomic.
6. For this context see Karoline Leach, *In the Shadow of the Dreamchild: A New Understanding of Lewis Carroll,* (London: Peter Owen Publishers, 1999).
7. Lewis Carroll was a great enthusiast and supporter of photography and he made hundreds of portraits of his adult and children friends. His nude portraits of girls (including Alice Liddell) have created much controversy even though social approaches towards children's nudity were different at the time and need be interpreted accordingly. For more information on Carroll as a photographer see Helmut Gernsheim, *Lewis Carroll—Photographer,* (New York: Chanticleer Press, 1950) and Nichole R. Rougeau, Alice's Shadow: Childhood and Agency in Lewis Carroll's Photography, Illustrations, and Alice Texts, (PhD dissertation, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2005).
8. Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland* (illustrated by H. Oxenbury) (Somerville: Candlewick, 2003), p.25.

FROM METAFICTION TO ILLUSION

This paper considers Talbot's *Alice in Sunderland* as a postmodern work.[9] Though a complex elaboration on the term postmodern is not the chief concern of the paper, we need to provide at least its understanding in this context. Postmodernism is here specified and limited to the western literary and other artistic production since the 1940s which is marked by the distinct interest in self-reference. This relates to the use of metafictional devices, substantial intertextual references, irony, and the employment of literary theory as a major discourse inseparable from imaginative literary works.

While not exclusively postmodernist, metafictional techniques definitely belong to the major characteristics of the 20th and 21st century literature.[10] Patricia Waugh describes metafiction as 'fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality'.[11] Postmodern texts are frequently labyrinthine, intellectually challenging enterprises frequently referring to other works so that reader's understanding often presupposes considerable background knowledge (such as Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* published in 1939). However, postmodern relativism and distrust of authorities have added a considerable flavour of playfulness into these intellectually demanding projects (*Finnegans Wake* as a comic fiction). Postmodernists prefer lightness over seriousness and their playfulness is often effectively connected with the self-referential dimension. According to Edwards and Usher: 'Being located in the postmodern also points to the importance of textuality, of writing, and of reflexivity in the sense of having an elaborated awareness of what is done and what is constructed through text and discourse'.[12] Drawing attention to the text as a construct and considering relativistic interpretation of a non-determined, Einsteinian world, postmodernists initiate discussion about representation, mimesis and illusion, about 'realities' within and without text. This discussion necessarily

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9. The reader's experience of Talbot's work can be compared to reading Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49* (1966), a postmodern quest for meaning which gets lost in the redundancy of information and to Alan Moore's *From Hell* (1991-1996) in which additional and explanatory notes take a few dozens of pages and become narratives within the narrative.

10. See also Raymond Federman's concept of surfiction (Raymond Federman, "Surfiction—Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction," in Raymond Federman (ed.), *Surfiction: Fiction Now… and Tomorrow* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975), pp.7-8.

11. Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1984), p.2.

12. Richard Edwards and Robin Usher, *Postmodernism and Education: Different Voices, Different Worlds,* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.16.

engages the reader since according to Stephen Halliwell, '[a]rtistic mimesis is conceived of as the representation of a world in relation to which the audience imaginatively occupies the position of an absorbed and or engrossed witness. That is one reason why concept of mimesis […] inescapably raises questions about the relationship between the world *inside* and the world *outside* the mimetic world'.[13]

Alice in Sunderland is a metafiction par excellence and its readers are constantly reminded that *this* text is just a construct. To achieve this, Talbot has chosen to 'double-frame' the text as a theatre performance (a one-man show) and a dream. Before we focus on specific references to the text in order to illustrate how this framing works, we would like to discuss briefly some features of these two states. Theatre (based on the creation of fictional reality) and dreams (based on the imaginative power of the unconscious) represent two fundamental illusionary and imaginary realms of humankind. According to Bartoš, there are two basic characteristics of theatre: First, it permits changes – the place and time may alter and function differently in comparison to reality. Second, events and acts shown are not real, only fictional.[14] What Bartoš considers important is that the fictional world is taken for granted, its 'reality' is not questioned. Theatrical performances as well as dreams are based on the assumptions of the perception (and actually of the existence) of 'other reality'; their means of expression is an imaginative (symbolic and connotative) language which can be uniquely and subjectively interpreted. The main difference lies in an extent of detachment from the everyday experience of time and place. In the case of a play, a spectator 'willingly' agrees to be taken from 'the everyday,' and consciously accepts theatrical conventions of illusion and deception. However, while this essentially requires a certain detachment from usual experience of time and place, this distance is much less substantial than in the case of dreams. Dreams, on the other hand, are the link with the unconscious and the archetypal realm of the psyche and are primarily a-temporal.

The structure of *Alice in Sunderland* as a theatrical performance framed in a dream accentuates *illusion* as a central concept, motif and platform which the book is built upon. Interestingly, these 'frames' evoke strong interpretative associations with two major philosophers/thinkers of the western culture; namely Aristotle (drama) and Plato (*Allegory of the Cave*). The concepts of the western art and imagination have always been

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13. Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp.21-22.
14. Zdenek Bartos, *Divadlo a İluze* (Praha: Akademie Múzickych Umení v Praze, 2011), pp.13-14.

sceptical towards the notion of 'reality' and the 'real'. Plato's *Allegory* may serve as a common starting point for the tradition which articulates doubts about the authenticity of everyday experience and in which the True and Real go beyond the everyday.

A dream is a frequent artistic image used to indicate a complex tension of disbelief or, as in Talbot's work for instance, to break 'the fourth wall'.[15] Here are just two examples – both from the plays – which directly express an illusionary aspect of what we perceive as 'reality':

'*What is life? An illusion,*
A shadow, a fiction,
And the greatest profit is small;
For all of life is a dream,
And dreams, are nothing but dreams.'
(from the 17th century play by Calderon *Life is a Dream* Act II, l. 1195)

'*We are such stuff*
As dreams are made on;
And our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.'
(from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, also cited in *Alice in Sunderland*, 290)

ALICE IN SUNDERLAND AND ITS MYTHO-GEO-GRAPHICAL LANDSCAPE

Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment starts with unfinished metafictional sketches-drawings with explanatory notes from the author (Brian Talbot). The drawings depict a man who walks towards the Empire Theatre in Sunderland. Whereas the represented setting is realistic - we observe the man as he walks inside the Theatre and we 'recognize' realistic conventions of the setting – the metafictional strategy used at the very beginning fore-shadows and at the same time introduces a constant tension between multiple 'realities' exerted throughout the book.[16]

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15. See for example C. S. Rupprecht, *The Dream and the Text: Essays on Literature and Language* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993).
16. This is also attained through the use of illustrations. For example, the page 115 is divided horizontally into three 'layers'. The first one, at the top, depicts Lewis Carroll and Frederika Liddell on the beach in 1855. In the second and third picture the setting stays the same only time differs; they are set in the present and Talbot has a role of a guide who explains some myths related to Carroll. Geographical

Similarly to Alice's encounter with the White Rabbit, the man - after he enters the theatre – also meets the Wonderland character. *This* White Rabbit is running, nervously looking at his watch, and seems to be late for the show *Alice in Sunderland* promoted on the poster. The theatre is empty except for the man whom we follow; and an only actor with a rabbit mask appears on the stage in a Hamlet-like costume.[17] After a few complaining remarks about difficulties with aging and memory, the actor starts telling the story of the Empire Theatre which is linked to many famous actors, actresses and performers including Henry Irving (1838 - 1905) and Harry Houdini (1874 - 1926). Then the actor enlarges his scope and moves to the history of Sunderland which is actually 'a history of England in microcosm' to which the story of Lewis Carroll is closely linked historically and geographically.[18] Talbot takes Sunderland as a setting from which a vast explorative journey to the past - both historical and fictional - can be made. Sunderland is the area where Talbot was born, and *Alice in Sunderland* documents and discloses the net of myths related to the area. The book starts at the particular place (the Empire Theatre) and geographical setting seems to be the only stable point in the book as emphasized also by the actor's speech: 'But first – a sense of place. We have to know exactly where we are. This is crucial'.[19]

As the pages unfold, the borders between the real and fictional are constantly blurred. This is expressed clearly on the map of Sunderland where historical places and characters (Lindisfarne, York, Captain Cook) are grouped with fictional (Harry Potter, Dracula).[20] This, in our view, creates a complex 'mytho-geo-graphical landscape' in is impossible to recognize where the real ends and the imaginary or fictional begins (as in the case of Robin Hood or Dick Turpin, for instance). *Alice in Sunderland* contains also several mini-narratives within the main narrative, e.g. *Jack Crawford, the Hero of Camperdown*, 39–41, *Jabberwocky*, 123 - 125, *The Legend of Lambton Worm*, 232 – 249, etc.).

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frames and borders of the story are juxtaposed to the infinite spaces of fiction and imagination. Here we have 'real' setting, 'real' places that we may see, visit and experience, yet in this narrative they are de-familiarized and the ordinary becomes exceptional. The book then discovers and explores identity of Sunderland. We may observe also specific rules in the depiction of the setting and different mode of representation: more 'realistic' and photograph-like images are used to describe the look of modern, 20th century places (p.9 – the Earth, pp.63, 80 – Florence, p.100), while other forms and modes of representation are used to evoke the past.

17. Is this the White Rabbit changed into a man with a mask of the White Rabbit? One would expect that an actor changes into a character, yet here the process is reversed. An animal-like creature changes into a man.
18. Brian Talbot, *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment*, p.25.
19. Brian Talbot, *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment*, p.9.
20. Brian Talbot, *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment*, p.10.

Similarly to Waugh's claims that 'contemporary metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to an even more thoroughgoing sense that reality or history are provisional: no longer a world of external verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures,' it is evident that Talbot understands contemporary historical and cultural awareness as a mix of fact and fiction.[21] This is also clear in his showing the futility of searching for 'real' Lewis Carroll because '[w]hen we try to look at Carroll, we peer back in time through layers of myth'.[22] For example, there is no evidence that Mrs Liddell burnt Carroll's letters to Alice, '[e]ven Carroll's supposed life-long affection for Alice is pure conjecture,'[23] '[t]he boat trip, as described in the poem beginning Wonderland, is not a factual description but a whimsical condensation of several outings'[24] and '[t]he story that Queen Victoria, delighted by Alice, requests another book from Carroll and receives an impenetrable mathematical treatise is unfortunately not true'.[25] Postmodern skepticism towards reliability of any 'story' is also expressed in Talbot's direct association and depiction of Carroll as a magician – illusionist who helped to build a construction of cards which is unstable and may be easily pulled down.

The borders of the real and imaginary are yet problematized when a reader learns - rather early in the book - that not everything in the actor's story is true: 'At last. Stories. We've already had a few and there are many more to come. And all of them are true… apart from one. One is a total falsehood… a complete whopper… and it's up to you, my friends… er, friend… to guess which one'.[26] This has a double effect; though on one hand it questions all the narratives (we do not know which story is false); on the other hand, it keeps readers alert and curious because according to this assumption all the other stories are *true*.

ALICE IN SUNDERLAND – A THEATRE PERFORMANCE WITHIN A DREAM

Knowing how Carroll's *Alice* starts and ends, when the White Rabbit appears at the beginning of *Alice in Sunderland*, a reader may suspect that the whole story is a dream.

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21. Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction,* (London: Methuen, 1984), p.7.
22. Brian Talbot, *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment*, p.268.
23. Brian Talbot, *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment*, p.269.
24. Brian Talbot, *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment*, p.270.
25. Brian Talbot, *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment*, p.227.
26. Brian Talbot, *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment*, p.25.

What is more, after the character in Talbot's book sees the White Rabbit, he behaves as if nothing extraordinary happened even though he confesses that he 'must be dreaming!'[27] At the end, we of course learn that the performance (and the story which we followed) *was* a dream of a fictional Talbot who fell asleep during the performance of Swan Lake. The frame of *Alice in Sunderland* thus works in a following way: The reader follows a story of a man (fictional Talbot) who falls asleep in the theatre and dreams that he is in the theatre and watches the one-man show about the history of Sunderland.

The layering of fictional worlds intensifies with an extended dream within a dream structure as fictional Talbot of the story also falls asleep. This takes us to a Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi and his famous butterfly story in which one is not sure about the nature of one's existence: 'I dreamt that I was a butterfly… a butterfly dreaming of you reading a book composed of pictures and words… and one of the pictures was of me, dreaming my dream. Did this mean that I was a butterfly dreaming of being me?'[28] Dreams in general are explicitly used in *Alice in Sunderland* either as part of its plot (someone is dreaming and we observe their dreams) or mentioned via allusions and references to famous dreams and dreamers. Besides the mentioned story of a dreaming butterfly, there is also a famous quotation by E. A. Poe: 'All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream…'[29] and many other literal references to the concept of world as a dream, such as a dialogue between Tweedledum and Tweedledee,[30] a nursery rhyme 'Row, row, row your boat […] life is but a dream,'[31] the list of literary works which were either influenced or created after an impressive dream or simply have the structure or plot of a dream and many other literal references to the concept of world as a dream.[32]

In the book, identities of the actor (of a one-act play), the viewer and the author (Talbot) are mixed up and readers are offered several hints that they are all simply one person.[33] Nevertheless, reader still distinguishes between Brian Talbot (real person),

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27. Brian Talbot, *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment*, p.4.
28. Brian Talbot, *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment*, p.134.
29. Brian Talbot, *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment*, p.136.
30. Brian Talbot, *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment*, p.113.
31. Brian Talbot, *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment*, p.181.
32. Brian Talbot, *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment*, p.258.
33. The strategy of mixing characters and narrative voices is frequently used in postmodern fiction. The effect of coalescence of voices can be compared to the observations of Petr Chalupsky in his analysis of a narrator in Adam Thirlwell's novel *Politics*: 'A striking aspect of the novel's narrative voice is its complexity and ambiguity, as if the narrator suffered from a multiply split personality' (2010, 158). Petr Chalupsky, "Between Universal Particularities and Particular Universalities – the Essay as Novel and Farce as Essay in Adam Thirlwell's Politics," in Ewa Rychter (ed.), *Beyond 2000: The Recent Novel in English*, (Walbrzych: Wydawnictwo Panstwowej Wyzsej Szkoly Zawodowej im Angelusa Silesiusa w Walbrzychu, 2011), pp.151-167.

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'Talbot' (the author of the book who appears in the story, page 26), actor/ pilgrim who tells the story of Sunderland and the visitor at the Empire Theatre. Other example of mixed identities can also be found on page 90 when an actor sells 'his' graphic novel *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright*, or on page 113 when the viewer changes into the actor with a rabbit mask. The process of melting characters and identities is closely related to the notion expressed by Jana Waldnerová that essential attributes of a character must be the same in all worlds, be they real or fictional if coherence and plausibility are to be achieved.[34] The intriguing play with identities has strong ironic undertones also. The viewer (fictional Talbot *in the dream*) is a rude and ignorant theatre-goer. His mobile phone starts ringing (and he answers it), he falls asleep,[35] he complains that he needs a drink and yawns as the story bores him. This description fits well also the Talbot of the first layer of the text, as he too fell asleep during the performance.

　　Alice in Sunderland can be read as a semi-document but even though an attempt to demythologize is apparent, its readers are still reminded that this is only 'a creative work', a work of imagination, a construct. For instance, the process of writing and illustrating *Alice in Sunderland* is explicitly referred to on page 26 where 'Talbot' is drawing an actor – one of his alter egos and simply takes *his* role of a narrator in following slides. On page 94 we can even study a page from the 'real and authentic' script for the book, on page 310 'Talbot' plays the puppet theatre with the actor (the one who tells the story). Ironical rendering of the characters and references to the creative process are also linked to Mark Currie's interpretation of contemporary metafiction as 'a borderline discourse, a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction and criticism, which takes the border as its subject'.[36] Talbot's use of metafictional devices does not only maintain the 'playful' and in a way 'manipulative' strategies to entertain the reader, but it also contributes to raising fundamental questions of perception and instability– metaphorical and literal – of postmodern narratives as such. Significantly enough, in the middle of *Alice in Sunderland* there is a sequence depicting 'Talbot' as he wakes up at night disturbed by a dream. He cannot sleep, so he takes some hot drink and starts to draw. The illustration we can see is actually the first page of *Alice in Sunderland*, a sketch of a man coming to the Theatre. Constant breaking of the fourth wall thus creates various absurd situations such as when Talbot realizes that he is '[d]rawing a dream'.[37]

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34. Jana Waldnerová, *De/Konštrukcia Fikčnych Svetov* (Nitra: Universita Konštantina Filozofa v Nitre, 2008). p.121.

35. Brian Talbot, *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment*, p.36.

36. Mark Currie (ed.), *Metafiction* (New York: Longman, 1995). p.2.

37. Brian Talbot, *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment*, p.185.

As a dream the narrative in *Alice in Sunderland* is not based on the story in traditional causal sense but on associations. It resembles a collage, an album or a hypertext which takes a reader to further places; regressions and digressions are very frequent. In terms of Brian Richardson's typology of causation, the causality of *Alice in Sunderland* is mostly chance ('located on the border between order and chaos, ambiguity and incredulity') and metafictional ('the narrator or implied author tampers with the causal laws already established').[38] The leaps and links which may first seem far-fetched and illogical start to make sense if interpreted as dream logic. For example, Talbot takes Pensham Hill as his starting point.[39] Below the Hill there is Victoria Railway Bridge which is linked with trains. Trains evoke the shape (and image) of worm and consequently also that of a dragon which takes us to the Legend of the Lambton Worm.[40]

The links and associations are even intensified through Talbot's use of illustrations. For instance, when he depicts Lewis Carroll's puppet theatre, he consciously makes a link between Carroll's story and his own through similarly structured illustrations.[41] In the first picture, it is Carroll who pulls the strings with a puppet actor in a rabbit mask; in the second it is 'fictional Talbot' himself who is in control. This mirroring can be interpreted in a two-fold way; it becomes unclear who manipulates with whom. Is it Carroll who manipulates with 'Talbot' or is it 'Talbot' who manipulates with Lewis Carroll? With such question, the reader is again reminded of the postmodern framework of Talbot's text. According to Spariosu, postmodern '[t]otality necessarily *shows* itself broken or fragmented' and 'mimesis *appears* as an infinite play of mirrored reflections, of simulacra doubling and redoubling upon themselves'.[42] Having suggested all this, what is then our reading of Talbot's *Alice in Sunderland*? If we consider the text by Lewis Carroll as a base, it becomes clear that regardless its surrealist and nonsensical character; it represents 'the stable structure' and 'order' and became 'a stable point of reference' that other texts are built upon: *Alice in Sunderland* included. For that reason, we assume that the original stories of Alice – despite their illogical nature - can be understood as myths – in terms of Aristotelian 'structure of events'. As Manfred Pfister observes, 'In the form of the

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38. Brian Richardson, *Unlikely Stories: Causality and the Nature of Modern Narrative* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1997), p.62; Brian Richardson distinguishes four types of causality: supernatural, natural, and metafictional

39. Here, we simply omit the associations which had led to Pensham Hill.

40. Brian Talbot, *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment*, pp.229-232.

41. compare Brian Talbot, *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment*, pp.44 and 310.

42. Mihai Spariosu, *Mimesis in Contemporary Theory: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1984), p.78.

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mythos, the story becomes a manageable entity, with a beginning, middle and end. Aristotle's definitions of beginning, middle and end make it clear that the mythos represents a unified, self-contained causal content'.[43] A classic dramatic work in the Aristotelian sense then presupposes ordering. On the other hand, Talbot's rendering of the pretext is an evident and expressive representative of chaotic postmodern play with the real, and the questioning of the real. Following Brown's idea that '[i]n the postmodernism view, order is not associated automatically with reason. Instead, reason and society are both subject to definition' and understanding that Talbot's work would essentially beak apart has it not some elements which keep the narrative coherent to a certain extent, the reason for the use of Carroll's work as a pre-text for 'postmodern play' is logical.[44]

There is one more element we would like to comment on and that is a final scene of Talbot's work which has the function comparable to the catharsis in a sense of Greek tragedy. According to Martha Husain '*katharsis* can readily be understood as the clarity of the action's causal structure in the sense that all irrational, fortuitous, and personalized aspects must be excluded from it'[45] and she further characterizes it as 'compositional clearing'.[46] Waking up of a fictional Talbot can be read as a final ironical comment of the author. The Swan Lake, a classic work has been so uninteresting that he fell asleep. Woken up at the end of the performance, 'he' also receives applause for the story 'he' told us in his dream. The credits for the readers' catharsis in *Alice in Sunderland* must be inevitably shared: between Carroll, Talbot, 'Talbot' and if we trust the story even between 'Talbot's partner who did not wake him up during the Swan Lake.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, metafictional strategies accentuated with the frames of a play and dream dominate in the work by Brian Talbot and reader's assurance of the possibility of capturing any form of 'reality' and experience gets lost in a complex spectrum of realities. The conventions of theatre and the 'rules' of dream logic serve as efficient indicators of this state. A reader may ask: What kind of experience does this work offer? Is it possible

43. Manfred Pfister, *The Theory and Analysis of Drama,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.198.
44. Richard Harvey Brown, *Postmodern Representations: Truth, Power, and Mimesis in the Human Sciences and Public Culture,* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1995), p.5.
45. Martha Husain, *Ontology and the Art of Tragedy: An Approach to Aristotle's Poetics,* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), p.56.
46. Martha Husain, *Ontology and the Art of Tragedy: An Approach to Aristotle's Poetics*, p.57.

to find Ariadne's thread which will lead us out of this net of labyrinths? A clue which Talbot gives can be seen in the already discussed image in which he poses as Lewis Carroll and manipulates/ plays in a puppet theatre with a puppet which looks exactly like the actor of *Alice in Sunderland*, i.e. 'Talbot' himself.

Martin Gardner in his introduction to Carroll's work says that '[i]n the case of ALICE we are dealing with a very curious, complicated kind of nonsense, written for British readers of another century, and we need to know a great many things that are not part of the text if we wish to capture its full wit and flavor'.[47] Situational platform which Talbot builds is thus strongly ironical; it is clear that he plays with reader's naivety, but he sets the mirror not only to his own 'image' and work but also to the critical and theoretical reception of Alice in the 20th and 21st century. It has already been suggested that *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was primarily written as an entertainment for children, but as a cross-over text it has moved to the world of adult culture. This can be observed in the adaptations for adults (pornographic novel, see footnote 1) as well as in the scholarly pursuits of the book.

Evidently, there is a need to 'explain' illogical *Alice*; yet these explications may lead to misinterpretations and over-interpretations and we think that in the postmodern age it is rather important to be reminded that Alice was first written to entertain. Talbot's work can be – on one perspective - read in this way. However, the final effect of such project does not provide readers with any certainties and remains within postmodern framework of skepticism and doubt. This contribution, paradoxically, adds another brick to the analytical and interpretative structure of metatexts inspired by Alice. Yet, we are convinced that until authentic reader's experience, enjoyment and entertainment of the original text *will accompany* scholarly efforts, the wanderings and explorations of fictional and metafictional Wonderlands have their sense.

Carroll's story and facts from his life are in *Alice in Sunderland* likened to the structure built of cards which serve the master illusionist and can be easily pulled down. Yet, their power lies in their potential to enchant.

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47. Martin Gardner, *The Annotated Alice by Lewis Carroll,* (London: Penguin Books, 1981), p.7.

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