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On the Edge: The visual representation of young protagonists as wanderers

ABSTRACT:

This article shows how the representation of Young Adult literature protagonists in book covers is influenced by the assumption that childhood is an innocent and yearned-for life stage, an idea developed during Romanticism. Adolescence has distinctive characteristics; in particular, it is an in-between stage, projected towards adulthood. Recent book covers for Young Adult novels, such as Ian McQue's artwork for the Scholastic 2018 reissue of the *Mortal Engines* series (2001-2006) by Philip Reeve, and film posters for cinematographic adaptations of Young Adult series, such as those for *Divergent* (2011) and *Tomorrow, When the War Began* (1993), are based on a common visual composition inspired by Friedrich's painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818). The depiction of young protagonists on an edge, in the same position as Friedrich's wanderer, evidences how adults' view on adolescence is moulded by Romantic ideas and, simultaneously, it conveys how adolescents feel attracted by adulthood as well as concerned due to their precarious life stage.

KEYWORDS: Book covers; Ian McQue; Philip Reeve; film posters; adolescents.

1. The Romantic idea of childhood innocence, adolescents, and growing up

In an increasingly competitive book market for children and young adults, two paradigms seem to stand out: the long-lasting influence of Romanticism and the growing relevance of book covers as a marketing device. In recent times, critical works such as the volume *Time of Beauty, Time of Fear: The Romantic Legacy in the Literature of Childhood* (edited by James Holt McGravan in 2012) and Deborah Thack-

er's contribution "Imagining the Child" in *Introducing Children's Literature: From Romanticism to Postmodernism* (2002) have continued to fuel the debate regarding Romantic influences on the concept of childhood in books for young people. As Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer reminds us, Romanticism developed as a "countermovement to the Enlightenment" (2008, 183) and the Romantic idea of childhood originated as "a sharp criticism of the utilitarian thinking of the Enlightenment" (ibid.), which laid the groundwork for studies generally carried out from pedagogical and philosophical perspectives. As she argues, the Romantic notion of childhood has its roots in the ideas endorsed not only by early Romantics, but also by previous philosophers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (ibid., 184). Locke regarded the child as "'wax, to be molded and fashioned as one pleases'" (quoted in ibid.), whereas Rousseau paved the way for the second branch of thought that developed in parallel with Locke's: children are said to be like plants, they are nearer than adults to the natural state, they "should be perceived as […] being[s] in [themselves] and not as […] small adult[s]" (ibid.), and their "essential quality" is innocence (ibid., 184-85). The two concepts of childhood as either a primitive state or a blessed stage saw it as circumscribed in time and were at the core of the early Romantics' thoughts on the matter.

Although Rousseau did not claim that children should remain innocent, he firmly believed that their "natural innocence and kindness [are] menaced by social institutions like family, school, church and state" (ibid., 185); therefore, they should be exposed to these 'threats' as late as possible. The socialisation role of institutions is a pervasive idea also in Roberta Seelinger Trites's study on adolescent literature: society urges teenagers to become full members of it on condition that they renounce their potentially disruptive power as beings who can still modify the status quo around them (Trites 2000, 1-20). When compared to children, young adults are undoubtedly in a different position[1]: during adolescence, there is a "struggle for autonomy and increased time spent with peers" (Trentacosta and Izard 2020). The emergence of a more complex emotionality, including the "experience [of] more extreme emotions, both negative and positive", the development of adolescents' skills in "abstract thinking", and their involvement and interest in "abstract and complex social problems" are all basilar in the formation of adolescents' identity towards adulthood (ibid.).

[1] In this article, 'young adult', 'adolescent', and 'teenager' will be used as synonyms.

Adolescents are in a delicate stage between childhood – Romantic innocence – and adulthood – society and its compromises (Trites 2000, x). They commonly long to become adults because this means being more independent but, at the same time, they may fear this step forward, which will detach them from the 'safe refuge' of childhood, a world whose rules they are familiar with. Adolescence signals a passage that, once made, cannot be experienced again in the opposite direction: as Grilli explains, adolescence is "l'età […] in cui qualcosa si acquista e qualcosa si perde" (2012, 76). Alongside the acquisition of new knowledge and values, which ultimately make an adolescent become an adult, there is the progressive, partial abandonment of childhood's assurance: a safe place, which usually coincides with one's home; the sense of protection and of being important to someone given by parents or other figures performing the same role; the comforting trustworthiness of a small circle of friends. Adulthood is both a distant horizon and an unknown world, which entails different obligations, expectations, and social relationships in the broader encounter with institutions.

In Western countries, this dual process leads to an uncanny situation for adolescents: "[s]ociety forces young people into a liminal space which lies somewhere between childhood and adulthood, but that is essentially distanced from both. It is a period of transition which […] is obsessively aware of its status as such" (Sainsbury 2014, 209-10). From a young adult's point of view, they feel divided between competing forces: going on means the end of their childhood and the beginning of their new life as adults, but who knows what this life stage conceals? For the Romantics, childhood was a wished-for state: mankind should return to childhood to build a better future and, on the personal level, adults should crave for retrieving that lost innocence, an idea which is still valid in contemporary times. Therefore, from a grown-up's perspective, adolescents are on the edge of the sweet land of childhood, with just one step separating them from the ravine of the adult world.

The purpose of this article is to show how book covers of recent Young Adult novels that represent protagonists in the same position as Caspar David Friedrich's figure in *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818) evidence both how the influence of Romantic ideas is still pervasive and how adolescents feel 'on an edge'. After reflecting on a few interpretations of Friedrich's painting and the relevance of book covers in the publishing industry and, more specifically, for Young Adult (YA) literature, the article will draw on literary as well as visual social semiotics studies to analyse Ian McQue's book covers for the 2018

Scholastic reissue of Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines* series (2001-2006) and the film posters advertising the cinematographic adaptation of two YA novels, *Divergent* (2011) and *Tomorrow, When the War Began* (1993).

2. Friedrich's *Wanderer* and adolescence

Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* is one of the most emblematic paintings of early German Romanticism and it is "[c]onsidered a quintessential representation of the sublime" (Haladyn 2016, 61). It depicts a figure that gained huge popularity at that time, the wanderer, a "subject [that] became a characteristic feature of Romantic literature in the first half of the nineteenth century" (Lorant 2008, 122). The theme has its origins in pre-Romanticism: wanderers were the epitome of the disheartened cosmopolitan society that enjoyed its time travelling around Europe. Afterwards, wandering was at the centre of the 'novel of apprenticeship', such as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship Years*, 1795-96), and it was metaphorically understood as going deep into the subject's interiority (ibid., 122-3).

Friedrich's Wanderer is firmly standing in dark coat and trousers on the edge of a precipice, his left leg ahead of the other, his hands not visible[2]. He is seemingly staring at an indefinite point in the distance while showing his back to viewers. He is a "*Rückenfigur* [back-figure]" (Gaete 2020, 61; italics in original), whose identity is unknown, despite much speculation about it. According to Haladyn, on a more metaphorical level, the Wanderer may be related to the complex socio-cultural and political changes undergoing at the time, especially regarding what being 'human' meant and its relations with the 'rights of man' as well as the affirmation of the nation-state, where the individual is apart from the masses and at the same time part of them (2016, 56). Conversely, others argue that the painting "conveys meanings that reflect a profound inner state of mind and spirit rather than nationalistic messages" and that the artist poses the Wanderer and, in more general terms, the human being as the protagonist of this intense emotional experience, giving artistic shape to the Romantics' propensity to focus on the inner self and emotions (Gaete 2020, 61).

Both interpretations of the *Rückenfigur* as depicting the "emerging modern subject" (Haladyn 2016, 55) or the embodiment of the Romantic propensity to introspection place the individual at the centre of a discovery process of their

[2] From now on, 'Wanderer' with capital letter will refer to Friedrich's figure.

social position or their own Self. This process might well be considered the contact point between Friedrich's figure and adolescents because adolescence is a turbulent period of transition when the individual Self is struggling to affirm its own existence and uniqueness by finding its place in society and by affirming its differences from others. To do so, adolescents face, experience, and criticise society considering it from their personal standpoint, and all the while they fight to make their individuality part of it. This results in alternating processes: they usually tend to find it difficult to follow established social rules, but they also wish to conform to be part of the social system. A similar process happens when they pursue their interests but, at the same time, they also seek peers sharing their hobbies to count on somebody's friendship while they are trying new experiences. As individuals who generally want to stand out from like-minded peers and society, but also feel part of a community, adolescents are like Haladyn's 'modern subject', elevated above his nationals as a symbol and simultaneously embedded in the majority. Romantic introspection and the "spiritual *Self*" (Gaete 2020, 61; italics in original) portrayed in Friedrich's painting can be considered the equivalent of finding one's own adult identity and one's place within society.

Wandering is strictly linked to "the aesthetic category of the 'sublime', which includes 'terror' as a source of emotional pleasure" (Lorant 2008, 127). In Friedrich's canvas, the Wanderer is on the edge of a rock, looking at a "sublime landscape" with "no clear boundaries [that] suggests the mysterious and inscrutable of life and the world" (Gaete 2020, 61). His position renders what it means to be an adolescent in the contemporary world, that is, being in between two life stages where young people build their own identity while looking upon a broad horizon of possibilities and a pervading fog covers adult compromises and the uncertainty of the future – which will not be as care-free and innocent as adults think that childhood is.

Uncertainty regarding what the future holds is a condition common to all mankind. This feeling connects adults and teenagers and it may explain "the tendency of adult readers to empathize with crisis-riven adolescents" through Julia Kristeva's idea of adolescence (Falconer 2010, 91): in her opinion, this life stage is "an 'open psychic structure' that may be experienced at any stage of life, and not once but repeatedly" (ibid.). Indeterminacy can inspire terror and, thus, pleasure deriving from it, as the Romantic sublime expects. However, there is a difference between adults and adolescents fearing this condition: the first have already gone through their biological adolescence, while the latter experience its

terrors and pleasures for the first time. Therefore, their specific life stage is an excellent position from which adolescents can experience feelings of the Romantic sublime and it is equally true that, from a literary perspective, the way adults conceive and represent young people on an edge, still in time to turn back to childhood's safe haven, is an example of how Romantic ideas continue to exert a strong influence in the contemporary era.

3. Book covers and Young Adult literature

Covers have attracted growing attention and investment in publishing houses in recent decades. They have always been and still are a key element in the book market to convince potential buyers to become actual buyers:

> [e]ssentially, a book cover works as an advertisement that uses primarily visual means to attract attention to the text and to convey the minimum of essential information (title and author) and possibly other information (publisher's name, advertising copy, blurbs, etc). […] The cover, in other words, offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. (Sonzogni 2011, 15)

Considering that bookshops have been intensifying the use of online platforms and that the number of titles is rising (Gudinavičius and Šuminas 2017, 430), it is understandable that there is increasing competitiveness among publishers to provide potential readers with the most captivating image that will convince them to buy a book in a time frame that may last a few seconds[3]. Covers are all the more fundamental when it comes to young people, not only because online platforms showing thumbnail-size covers have been acquiring more relevance but also because the specific readership is used to technological devices where images can be scrolled quicker than ever (ibid.). Primarily, though, covers can be a tool to help connect adolescents and books considered appropriate for their age, given that it has always been difficult to define Young Adult as a genre and to find a place for it in bookstores, which has not helped readers to locate the stories they were looking for (Yampbell 2005, 350-5).

[3] Considering new book releases and the factors influencing readers' preferences, some scholars have proved the "statistically significant impact on readers' interest" of three variables (d'Astous 2006, 135): "the reputation of the author (in the case of books with a technical content), the attractiveness of the book cover, and the reputation of the publisher" (ibid., 145).

Publishers often update covers to respond to the varying tastes of young people (ibid., 358). This means that styles and techniques are different depending on historical times: in the 1970s-80s watercolours depicted a key scene from the novel, between the 1980s-90s cover illustrators used photographs, and at the beginning of the 20th century technology allowed for new materials and finishes to be used. Publishers and artists know what adolescents are looking for – something that feels and looks adult enough without being for a mature readership (ibid.). Like their readers, YA novels are on an edge between childhood and adulthood, and covers try to find a balance to attract the intended readers.

Reprinting books with a modernised cover "is a popular and often successful marketing attempt" (ibid., 360); not by chance, reissues frequently tie in with cinematographic adaptations. The book covers analysed in this article were published by Scholastic in conjunction with the release of the *Mortal Engines* film in 2018. Made by Ian McQue, these covers offer a more impressive visual interpretation than the previous artworks that also build on the idea of "tomboy" heroines (Balkind 2014, 45), which spread after the international success of another YA series, Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, featuring a female protagonist who has been conceived as the contemporary evolution of female characters with traditionally male temperaments and energy. Reeve's *Mortal Engines* was first published in 2001, while *The Hunger Games* hit the market in 2008 and its first cinematographic adaptation was released in 2012. It is easy to connect the dots between the success of *The Hunger Games* and the *Mortal Engines* reissue on occasion of its film release in 2018. The idea of a sturdy-tenacious heroine had attracted throngs of adolescents: already familiar with *The Hunger Games*, adolescent readers searching for similar stories and who were too young to read *Mortal Engines* at the time of its first publication must have been tempted to try Reeve's writing thanks to a book cover echoing another YA literary success. Unless Scholastic were to offer a new illustration where readers could find something that touched their subconscious, Reeve's novel might have gone unnoticed because its previous visual interpretations looked more child-oriented and would have been discarded at once by teenagers[4].

As Sonzogni writes, "the cover implies two types of interactions: between text and image and between text and reader" (2011, 15). Since up to fifty percent of the human brain is employed to decode visual information (Van De Graaf 2021), cover design, composition, and art are relevant means of

[4] For some examples of previous covers, see section 4.

communication and interaction also between publishers and readers and, more generally, between adult producers and adolescent readers: covers constitute "a space where both particular texts and collective narratives of childhood and culture might be interrogated" (Hateley 2016, 30)[5]. For Hateley, focusing on the paratextual means pondering over how those narratives are formed and sold to young readers – in other words, it means taking into account the construction of an adult-approved idea of childhood and, in the case studies considered herein, of adolescence. Since "communication in children's literature is fundamentally asymmetrical [because in] [p]roduction, publication and marketing by authors and publishing houses, [in] the part played by critics, librarians, booksellers and teachers, as intermediaries – at every stage of literary communication we find adults acting for children" (O'Sullivan 2004, 3), covers can be considered another example of how this unequal dialogue unfolds in the book market. They are designed, produced, and proposed by adults to young readers and, as such, they are a further instance of how the latter are influenced and Lockean-'moulded' by those who have more power in society. Consequently, cover art is a means through which adults convey messages to adolescents because it shows the grownups' perspective on the young protagonists. Adults' point of view is culture-specific (Sonzogni 2011, 15-16); therefore, it may include a Romantic idea of childhood still ongoing within Western societies. In this sense, it is interesting to focus on the representation of young people in book covers because it is supposed to blend marketing drives, adult biases deriving from Romanticism, and aesthetic appeal with readers' expectations, feelings, and interests, such as protagonists who stand out and are 'on an edge', projected towards adulthood after wandering during adolescence.

4. Adolescents on an edge

Wandering cities are those depicted by British author Philip Reeve in his steampunk quartet opening with *Mortal Engines* (2001), which was followed by *Predator's Gold* (2003), *Infernal Devices* (2005), and *A Darkling Plain* (2006). Later on, Reeve also wrote three prequels, *Fever Crumb* (2009), *A Web of Air* (2010),

[5] Although this and the following references to Hateley's ideas as well as O'Sullivan's statement concern childhood and children's literature, they can be considered valid also for adolescence and YA literature because asymmetrical power relations between adults (or institutions) and young people are equally at work (Trites 2000, 54-83).

and *Scrivener's Moon* (2011); recently, a collection of short stories entitled *Night Flights* (2018) has been added to the *Mortal Engines* world. Known in the USA as the 'Hungry City Chronicles', this "progressive" series (Watson 2004, 1) tells the adventures of Tom Natsworthy and Hester Shaw, two adolescents living in a distant future where Earth has barely survived the Sixty Minute War, a global conflict that humans fought eventually "destroy[ing] themselves in that terrible flurry of orbit-to-earth atomics and tailored-virus bombs" (Reeve 2018d, 7). After that, the Traction Era began: some major cities in the world installed huge caterpillar tracks and became mobile to hunt farming towns, smaller cities, and static villages. They capture, 'eat', and then dismantle their preys to get components, fuel, and working people for their incredibly complex engine rooms.

London is the first Traction City ever and there lives Tom, a Third Class Apprentice Historian, the equivalent of a lower-middle class citizen since its society is rigidly hierarchic and divided into four Guilds. Tom loves London, although he wishes he could become an air-merchant to travel from one settlement to the other. He does not concern himself with the socio-political situation because

> […] he kn[ows] he mustn't feel sorry for [London's preys]: it [is] natural that cities [eat] towns, just as the towns [eat] smaller towns, and smaller towns sna[p] up the miserable static settlements. [This is] Municipal Darwinism, and it [is] the way the world ha[s] worked for hundreds of years […]. (ibid., 11)

However, London has been forced to move further from her usual hunting area because it already has difficulties in finding a good settlement to devour: Municipal Darwinism has its limits since it does not take into consideration the fact that small towns will end one day.

Hester is an outcast, an orphan girl after her mother was brutally murdered before her eyes when she was a child. During a fight with their assaulter, Hester lost an eye and part of her nose because he hit her with a sword before running away; as a result, she has a "terrible scar r[unning] down her face from forehead to jaw, making it look like a portrait that had been furiously crossed out" (ibid., 28). She has been raised by Shrike, one of the many Resurrected Men, which are "machines that are partly formed from dead humans whose brains have been emptied of memories and feelings" and that have been enhanced by mechanical engineering (Ostry 2004, 233). She detests Traction Cities, but most of all she hates Valentine, her mother's murderer, and she lives only to seek re-

venge. As the reader will get to know, Valentine is her father and one of the strongest advocates of the Traction Era, secretly involved in reconstructing a lethal weapon from ancient times, MEDUSA, to make London unbeatable. Like Hester, against Municipal Darwinism is also the Anti-Traction League, whose aim is to begin a new, peaceful era by returning to unmoving settlements.

Despite the multiple storylines in the series, its pivots are always two adolescent protagonists: Hester and Tom in *Mortal Engines* and *Predator's Gold*, Wren and Theo Ngoni – Wren being Tom and Hester's daughter – in *Infernal Devices* and *A Darkling Plain*. Reeve's first drafts date back to the 1990s and the initial world was different from what *Mortal Engines* then became because he "was aiming to write a SF novel that was Dickensian in mood and scale" (Reeve 2021b), as the author himself states in his blog.

Over more than twenty years, there have been many covers for reissues, among which the artwork by Ian McQue to which this article refers, "one of the best things that's happened to the series", as Reeve wrote in another blog post on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of *Mortal Engines* (2021c). Older covers seem aimed more at children than teenagers: to name but a few, the first hardcover UK edition shows the two protagonists on a hot-air balloon and in the lower part there is a Traction City far off, almost undistinguishable (Reeve 2001 - 9780439993456)[6]. This drawing has vivid colours and it does not convey a warlike atmosphere. The same illustration was used for the 2002 paperback edition and again for the fifteenth anniversary paperback reprint (Reeve 2002 - 9780439979436; Reeve 2015 - 9781407152134). The 2012 reissue by Scholastic US focuses on the technological aspects of the series: it is a labyrinth of pipes and gears with a solitary male human figure in a white coat in the centre, who at first gets unnoticed amidst the gigantic engine; another paperback reissue foregrounds the co-protagonist Shrike, thus giving prominence to the science-fiction element of the work (Reeve 2012a - 9780545222112; Reeve 2012b - 9781407131276). In more recent times, there is the 2018 cover that replicates the *Mortal Engines* film poster: it is an extreme close-up of Hera Hilmar, who plays Hester, showing half of her face, with her mouth and nose covered by a red scarf, dark brown-reddish hair, and a determined and angry

[6] Despite multiple attempts, Scholastic never replied to my requests for permission to reproduce book covers with Ian McQue's artwork. I am providing the ISBN of the book editions and reissues to which I am referring to enable readers to find covers online more easily.

gaze underlined by her frowned eyebrow and her eye staring at the viewer (Reeve 2018c - 9781407188959).

Reissues presenting film posters as covers are a good way to increase sales by attracting readers who already know the story but wish to collect the newest version as well as enthusiastic viewers who are interested to read the novel for the first time. However, when *Mortal Engines* became a film, Reeve's work had already passed its fifteenth anniversary and it was old if compared to the speed with which successful YA books are adapted into films. This is likely to be the reason why Scholastic started reissuing Reeve's quartet before the release of Christian Rivers' movie, building on the rising expectancy about it by adding the caption "Soon to be a major motion picture" to Ian McQue's masterpiece (Reeve 2018d - 9781407189147).

Bearing Friedrich's painting in mind, even at a glance, it is easy to recognise that McQue's cover for *Mortal Engines* follows the same compositional idea of the 1818 canvas[7]: a (presumably) young person, seen from behind, who is standing in front of a majestic and terrifying scenery that conveys the concept of Romantic sublime. Of course, at Barthian's denotation level[8], Friedrich's Wanderer is looking at a boundless natural landscape, while the person in the cover is facing a technologically-improved, urban mountain – London as a Traction City. Unless one has already read the novel – which is not the case for potential readers picking up the volume in a bookshop – the city portrayed can be identified as London only after a while because the Big Ben is not well visible and, even if St Paul's Cathedral stands out on the top, this might be any religious building with Neoclassical, Renaissance, and English Baroque architectural styles. Only by summing the two elements are viewers enabled to recognise the settlement as London. However, this identification is not essential in terms of mood and atmosphere evoked by the cover: it is relevant when considering the degree of closeness to the contents, but it does not add to the sense of threat and imminent fight conveyed by colours and visual features. The city looks like a fortress built on multiple levels, which visually render "London's social stratification […] based upon exploitation, inequality and overprivilege" (Sambell 2004, 254). Clouds are covering the sky and the predominant colours

[7] In analysing book covers and film posters, Harrison's tables with basic features, processes, and elements of the three metafunctions – representational, interpersonal, and compositional – that work together to create meaning in images are particularly useful (cf. Harrison 2003, 51-58).

[8] For a full description and exemplification of Barthes' denotation and connotation "layers", see van Leeuwen 2011, 4-11.

are white, grey, and black, which are consonant with the general impression of a world in conflict and with little hope because the machinery depicted seems to work towards war rather than building a new Eden and the airships flying around the urban mountain look almost like sentinels.

Separated from London by a bare, lifeless, and snowy section of land, a solitary human being seen from behind is standing on a structure made of wood and metal, tubes and screws, in front of the city, creating a "narrative structure" (Harrison 51) between the two that underlines the two main subjects represented; therefore, the viewer's attention is drawn to the figure and the city, even though the first is only a small-sized element in the lower section of the cover. The person looks like a female and, after being acquainted with the novel, she is identifiable as Philip Reeve's protagonist, Hester Shaw, because of her red scarf. She is wearing black trousers and a sweater, dark boots, and a dark long coat with a crossbody bag; she is holding a cylindrical object in her left hand and her hair is messy and fluttering in the wind. Her depiction on the edge of a platform is Friedrich-inspired and every detail makes her representation less congruent with the idea of gracious, angelic feminine beauty and more similar to the ideal of the "tomboy" heroine (Balkind 2014, 45). Readers will find evidence of this in *Infernal Devices* and *A Darkling Plain*, since Hester secretly wishes that she had not had her daughter Wren and finds it increasingly difficult to feel her as part of her life (Reeve 2018b, 31).

The wooden-metallic structure on which she stands may be part of a smaller town facing the monstrous urban mountain because it does not seem connected to the latter[9]. London's width can be envisaged by the fact that its outer borders are beyond the cover's material edges, just like the painting's "sublime landscape" has "no clear boundaries" (Gaete 2020, 61). London is huge, threatening, and oppressive thanks to the use of a vertical angle, commonly "associated with power relationships" (Harrison 54): London is at the top end of the high angle while Hester's position on the platform is at a lower level, contrary to Friedrich's canvas where the Wanderer is located higher than, or at least at the same level of, the mountain peaks. In addition to perspective, there are airships flying around London to render its power, as already said: only a few of them are directed towards the city and yet they do not look as if they are making it their war target. Therefore, it seems that London can count on many

[9] It becomes clear that it is a town when the reader turns the volume, as McQue's artwork continues on the back cover.

weapons when compared to the figure's side since Hester's platform is bare, apart from some metallic bars on the left. She is alone to fight the urban mountain towering above her. Nonetheless, her firm pose does not suggest fear while she is staring at London – on the contrary, considering the compositional metafunction of the image (ibid., 55-58), it symbolically represents untamed bravery, a rebellious character, and a strong will.

A slightly less steady pose but equally challenging those defending Municipal Darwinism and Traction Cities is that of the female figure in McQue's illustration for *Predator's Gold* (Reeve 2018f - 9781407189154). Here, a young woman is again portrayed with her back to the viewer: she is wearing a woollen coat and she is venturing a step towards a castle-city in front of her, wrapped up in the fog and depicted once more through a high vertical angle[10]. Colours are lighter and brighter when compared to the previous cover: there are mainly blue and white shades, especially for the sky and the snow in between the human figure and the city, but there are also blacks and greys, and the orange glow of an electric light as the only source of warm colour. The atmosphere is as oppressive as in *Mortal Engines*: airships are flying threateningly towards the figure and the fog makes the castle-city even more mysterious and potentially dangerous. Its grandiosity is underlined both by the female's position and the platform where she is standing: similarly to the first cover, she is at a lower level than the top of the castle; moreover, the metallic structure is old and the hole beneath the platform makes the whole framework precarious. Viewers may feel the power imbalance between the castle-city and the figure 'more real' also thanks to the use of markers all conveying high modality, including full colour drawing, a fully conceived background, and deep perspective (Harrison 58). For the figure's hesitant step and her hand on her face, her pose seems less resolute than Hester's; however, this does not mean that she is less brave: she is facing the unknown castle-city alone in the middle of a snowstorm – which echoes the style of Romantic paintings – and, despite this, she is stepping forward, not backward. Once more, this kind of representation combines a pose inspired by Friedrich's canvas and the idea of a young character facing society, which is represented by the city.

[10] The human figure might be Hester again or a new character, Freya Rasmussen, the adolescent ruler of a Traction City in ruin called Anchorage who rescues and hosts Tom and Hester when their airship is attacked by a fanatical division of the Anti-Traction League. As previously said regarding the identification of London, here too the identity of the female figure is not relevant in terms of atmosphere and mood conveyed to potential readers.

Whereas the first two covers portray young females, in *Infernal Devices* and *A Darkling Plain* the subject changes: in the first instance, the Wanderer's position is occupied by another character 'on the edge', Shrike – half man and half robot (Reeve 2018b - 9781407189161). Indeed, Shrike is one of the most evident references to Romanticism in the *Mortal Engines* world because his assembly starts from corpses and, therefore, he can be considered a variation of Mary Shelley's Creature in *Frankenstein* (1818), which is "the first modern science-fiction novel […] [presenting the] now-typical SF motif of the artificial man" (Yates 2004, 1). In the second case, the human figure portrayed is Tom as an adult rather than as an adolescent, and the composition changes accordingly: he is standing on bare ground, not a platform; the city depicted is seemingly an inoffensive wreck; and there is a new sense of hope given by chromatic shades (Reeve 2018a - 9781407189178). The three prequels and the short stories collection *Night Flights* also have covers drawn by McQue and built following the same basic composition of the main series: a human figure seen from behind standing in the lower part of the illustration with a vast landscape in front of their eyes. In particular, *Night Flights* looks like a patent homage to Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, given that the person is on a rock protruding towards a ravine and the mountain-city is surrounded by a foggy and cloudy scenery (Reeve 2018e - 9781407186740).

Skimming the book covers of other novels by Reeve, it is clear that McQue's Friedrich-inspired artwork was a successful representation, since the same composition was used for other books as well. For example, the image for the 2019 reprint of *Here Lies Arthur*, first published in 2007, was redesigned by McQue following the same pattern, and cover art by other illustrators is inspired by his work, such as David Wyatt's illustration for the 2019 reissue of *Larklight* or the original book covers by Paddy Donnelly for *Utterly Dark and the Face of the Deep* and *Utterly Dark and the Heart of the Wild* (Reeve 2019b - 9781407195995; Reeve 2019a - 978152660661; Reeve 2021a - 9781788452373; Reeve 2022 - 9781788452861). However, this is a trend that goes far beyond Reeve's works, as proved by the film posters of some recent adaptations of YA novels: for example, *Divergent* (2011), adapted in 2014, and *Tomorrow, When the*

War Began (1993), adapted in 2010[11]. Film posters are as much relevant as book covers because, as Wilkie-Stibbs writes,

> […] [c]hildren's exposure to other media such as film, television animations, and video, means increasingly that they are likely to encounter the media adaptations of a children's fiction before they encounter the written text and to come to regard it as the 'original' from which to approach and on which to base and 'make sense' of their (later) reading of the written version. (2004, 6)

This is especially true when publishers reprint novels and use poster images as book covers, thus imposing a visual interpretation connected to a cinematographic product, which may be rather different from the original story.

The protagonists' representation in the mentioned posters makes them the epitome of the adolescent as a thematic figure like McQue's cover artwork. They also equally blend the idea of teenagers on the edge of a life stage and adults' view on adolescence influenced by Romantic theories about childhood and adulthood, the latter of which was commonly considered 'corrupted' because it had lost innocence and naivety, two of the main qualities attributed to children. In these posters, colours are extremely relevant. Since colour "forms an integral part of semiotics, non-verbal communication and spatial orientation [and] carries important symbolic and associative messages" which are culture-specific (Aslam 2005, 2), pink, yellow, and orange shades can convey the idea that the protagonists are society's hope for a better future because they are considered warm colours and are associated with fire, sun, and heat (Caivano 1998, 395). In the *Divergent* poster ("Divergent" 2014), the female protagonist becomes the focus of hopefulness because she is illuminated by sunlight, whereas in the *Tomorrow, When the War Began* image the general atmosphere has a diffused sense of hope for the warm sunset colours that overshadow the impact of elements linked to war, like the fires on the left and the helicopters on the right ("Il domani che verrà - The Tomorrow Series", 2010a); not by chance, these are located in the background or towards the margins and, thus, are subservient to the human figure at the centre corresponding to the main nucleus of information (Harrison 57).

[11] Another interesting example is the 2016 reissue of *The City of Ember* by Jeanne DuPrau (2016 - 9780375822742). However, Paul Sullivan's artwork for this novel is not discussed in the article because the intended readership is younger, being *Ember* suggested for children who are 8-12 years old, as specified on the back cover, and because the protagonists do not engage in a fight like in the other works considered.

For *Tomorrow, When the War Began*, the Friedrich-inspired poster is not the original one but its Italian version, used by publisher Fazi in 2011 to reissue the Italian translation of the novel (Marsden 2011a - 9788876250804). Curiously enough, a very similar image was employed for the Spanish translation published by Molino the same year (Marsden 2011b - 9788427200760). These representations both convey reassurance, albeit to a different degree than the original poster, which is full of war-related prompts and its warm colours do not convey hopefulness because they are directly associated with the explosion in the upper part of the image ("Il domani che verrà - The Tomorrow Series", 2010b). Considering the Italian poster and cover, the Spanish cover, and the fact that Ian McQue was born in Edinburgh, the visual representations referred to may suggest a culturally-centred preference in the European area for echoing Friedrich's Wanderer in depicting adolescents, most likely due to the cultural influences of German and British Romanticism.

5. Conclusion

Romanticism is still exerting a powerful influence on contemporary society, including adolescent literature. In book covers and film posters such as those analysed in this article, young protagonists are literally portrayed on an edge and this position acquires different meanings. Illustrations like McQue's can win teenagers' approval because they render the feelings usually associated with their life stage: uncertainty, desire to grow and to be part of society, will to stick by one's ideas for a better world, and fear to leave childhood safety behind. However, influenced by Romantic ideas, adults may conceive teenagers as still untouched by the hardships of engaging urban mountains: young protagonists on an edge stand for the last chance they have to turn around and stay safe, protected, untainted; at the same time, they can also embody hope for a better society in the future.

Friedrich-inspired book covers of contemporary YA stories and recent film posters like those for *Divergent* and *Tomorrow, When the War Began* signal that the wanderer as a figure and the Romantic idea of childhood are still strong within Western societies – especially in the European context. Nonetheless, they also render adolescent readers' widespread feeling of being in an in-between, wandering age. In this sense, they both mirror adults' common view on youth while providing a visual recognition of teenagers' concerns.

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