Comment:

"All Compressed and Rendered with a Pathetic Delicacy That Astounds the Eye": *Midjourney* Renders Ambergris as Constantinople

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Abstract

Text-to-image software have become widely accessible over the last few years, and the resolution of the images generated by these machine-learning software has increased to such a degree that the images attract more and more public attention. Midjourney *is one of the few available AI tools that provides images to textual prompts. With early beta access granted, I have put the abilities and biases of the tool to the test by prompting it to blend a fictional city (i.e., Ambergris, created by Jeff VanderMeer in 1993 first for a novella) with a historical one (i.e., Constantinople). The ontological distance of these two cities would not pose a problem, for the textual and visual data for both are vastly available on the internet, which data the software utilizes to generate images. The decision to blend these two is based on Ambergris's quality of being a city influenced by the history of Constantinople, yet diverging from it in other aspects. The software ended up generating images, where it employed various periods and urban features of both cities, all the while conforming to depiction styles that can be associated with both Ambergris and Constantinople.*

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Ambergris is the fictional city in the eponymous novel cycle by Jeff VanderMeer[1]. He worked on Byzantine history while preparing his trilogy, so much so, that history of the city of Ambergris to a large extent alludes to the history of Byzantine Constantinople, especially in its early days. Ambergris's appropriation of Byzantine history is difficult to grasp at the surface level, due to the eclecticism and the severe transformation of Byzantine elements (tropes, nomenclature, art, etc.) in the process of its appropriation for creating a fantasy storyworld. In various instances, Jeff VanderMeer testified how Byzantine history influenced the world-building of Ambergris novels and shared insights on his understanding of history and its place in fiction. (Alışık 2022; Gevers 2002)

Recently we have witnessed a digital breakthrough, where various software tools that render texts into images became available for wider use. Thus, there is now a possibility to imagine fictional Ambergris and historical Constantinople, ontologically disparate two cities, visually as one. I received trial access to one of such softwares, *Midjourney* beta, text-to-image tool in June 2022, just before the company opened the beta version to the public use in July. Simply put, the software renders a textual prompt into four low-resolution images at which point the user could upscale and–or variate any of them to high-resolution images.

Earlier, in an interview, VanderMeer had stated that he would like to see a sequel to Finch, the third installment in the Ambergris cycle, in comic format, where the depiction of the city would bear some resemblance to Byzantine Constantinople (Alışık 2022). I had a very limited number of prompts to try and decided to explore the city of Ambergris incarnated as Constantinople. So, I typed "city of Ambergris depicted as Constantinople in a graphic novel" into *Midjourney*'s console. Here are three of the four preliminary low-resolution images the software rendered:

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[1] *City of Saints and Madmen* was originally published in 2002 by Prime Books; *Shriek: An Afterword* was originally published in 2006 by Tor Books; *Finch* was originally published in 2009 by Underland Press. A compendium volume has been published eventually, see VanderMeer (2020).
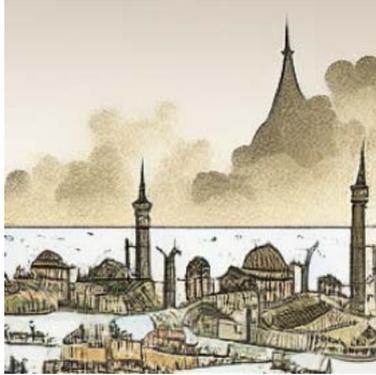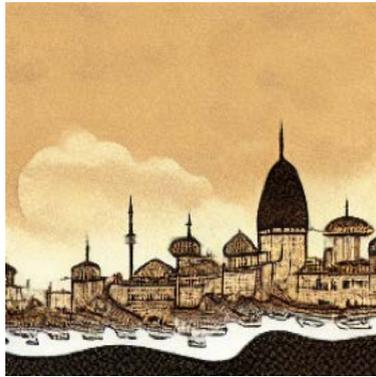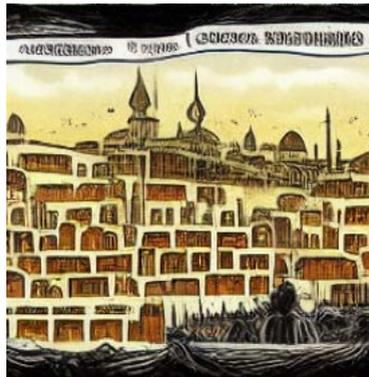
Figure 1a.

Figure 1b.

Figure 1c.

The first image (Figure 1a) has a looming and very familiar-looking tower among the mists on the far side of the body of water. The dome formations in the second image (Figure 1b) present a certain quality of the *gray caps*, a community depicted in the novels, and the architecture they had developed in their city *Cinsorium*—whose ruins the early colonizers founded Ambergris on. The third image (Figure 1c) peculiarly comes close to a miniature style. Two large domes in the background were reminiscent of giant *freshwater squid* heads, aquatic creatures native to the *River Moth*, by which Ambergris is located. I wanted to see more details, so I upscaled these three images.

The first image turned out to be this (Figure 2):
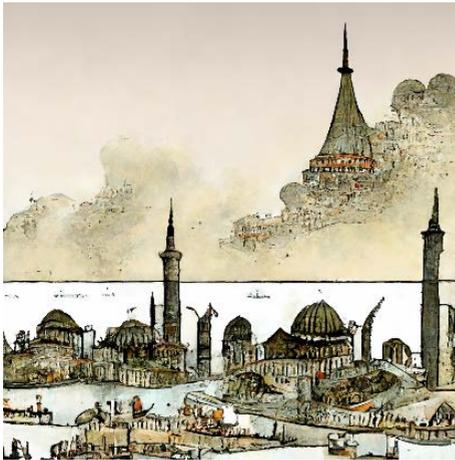

Figure 2.   Figure 3a.   Figure 3b.

Domes, spires (minarets or columns), a large body of water, and a labyrinthine urban fabric are prominently visible. These elements are part of the geography and depictions of both cities (i.e., Constantinople and Ambergris). Ambergris sits on the banks of *River Moth*, whereas Constantinople is by the Bosporus. Spires in the form of minarets and columns are also characteristics of the two cities. For instance, the image on the left (Figure 3a) resembles a minaret more whereas the other (Figure 3b) alludes to a column with a statue on top of it.

This makes it difficult to isolate the reason for putting minarets in the city; it could either be due to the Ambergris's input—which features both columns and minarets—or because *Midjourney* understands Constantinople as an Ottoman city as well as a Byzantine one, consequently making the juxtaposition of statue topped columns—a Byzantine element—and minarets possible. It can be safely concluded that it does not imagine the city as contemporary Istanbul in this image.

Presence of the looming tower in the background—with its location on a steep hill and its architectural form—implies that the depiction bears elements from the later periods of both cities. The tower is strikingly reminiscent of Galata Tower—a Byzantine period structure—and a magnified version of its mid–19th–century phase at that (Figure 4). Therefore, it is certain that the software reads "Constantinople" as both Byzantine and Ottoman. In addition, the inclusion of a structure located in Pera shows that the software considers it a part of Constantinople, which resonated with a post-Byzantine understanding of urban geography.
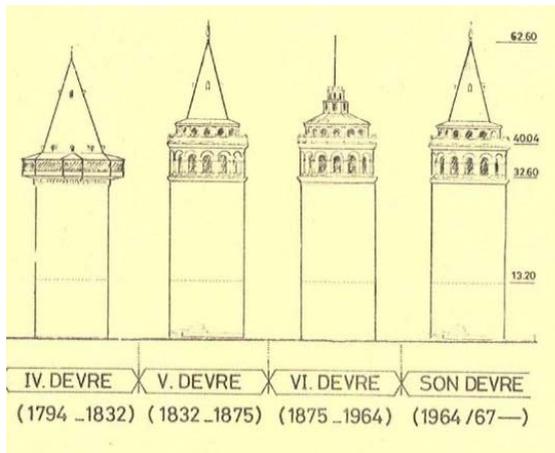

Figure 4. Various phases of Galata Tower (detail, *Mimarlık* 1979, 52)

As far as the chronology of Ambergris is concerned, the tower can be dated to a later period of the city. As a late development in Ambergris Cycle an uncanny, alien tower was constructed high above the city by the enslaved

labor of its inhabitants. It is visible from all over the city. The tower in the background might refer to that monument as well. While in its earlier periods Ambergris occupied only one bank of the River Moth, later it was flooded and divided by canals. Therefore, Figure 4 reflects the topographic parallel with the later ages of the fictitious city.

The mist is another prominent element in this scene, surrounding the gargantuan tower and its neighborhood. Such mist has been no stranger to Ambergris as it certainly has not been to Istanbul over the years. In many different periods of the city, this extraordinary phenomenon keeps appearing. First, when the founders of Ambergris had landed on the area: "[t]he Cappan found the city cast in a weak light, wreathed in mist come off the river. It must have been an ethereal scene—perhaps even a terrifying one" (VanderMeer 2002, 103). The second encounter is hundreds of years later: "The mist deepened until Dradin could not tell the difference between the world with his eyes shut and the world with his eyes open" (VanderMeer 2002, 60). Finally, in the last novel *Finch*, the mist is still thickening: "A white smoke had overtaken the black smoke. It looked now like the thick green spheres slamming into the Spit were dissolving into a cloud bank or a thick mist" (VanderMeer 2009, 242). So, the presence of mist can allude to any period of Ambergris, not really helping to date the image.

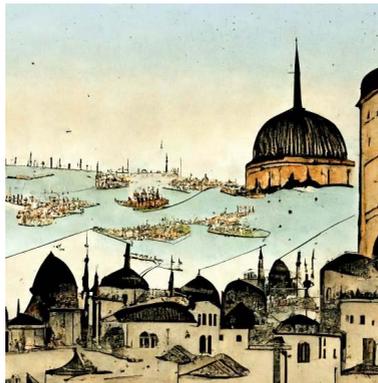When upscaled, the second image (Figure 5) transformed dramatically:

Figure 5.

This time the body of water is prominent. It is very likely the flood of Ambergris in its later periods (in *Finch*) that is the source for this scene, because the small patches of land are visible among the waters. This perspective, where a look from a residential area towards another one across the water is repeated in the second image, and is a common formula, especially in the panoramic depictions of Constantinople from the 18th century on (Figure 6).[2]

Figure 6. View from Beyazıt Tower, towards Galata Tower (Robertson 1853)

A monumental dome with a huge spire on it rises above the water level. Such a dome might refer to Hagia Sophia's, since it inspired all large domes in the city, and arguably is the most iconic of all. The 15th–century artist who never saw Constantinople depicting Hagia Sophia simplified the building to its most characteristic element: the dome. In the same spirit as the artist, the software also rendered the monument as the dome and its drum, merging the nave with the huge dome (Figure 7).

[2] Indeed, precedent city portraits employed a similar vantage point, a "perspective plan" (Nuti 1994; Maier 2012, 726).
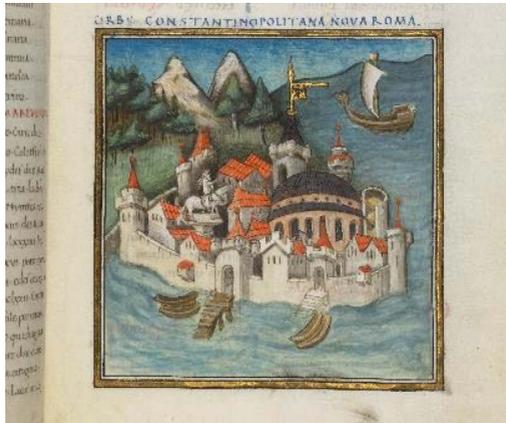
Figure 7. Constantinople as the new Rome. (Lamy 1436)

The dome with a huge spire on top of it is only logical in a blend of Constantinople and Ambergris, if the spire reflects a grotesquely magnified *alem* (finial) which adorns almost all the domes and minarets in Constantinople under Ottoman rule. Besides, Ambergris is teemed with domes and minarets too, their frequency increases in the Religious Quarter.

"[He s]tared speechless at the endless permutations of devotional grottoes, spires, domes, arches of the cathedrals of the myriad faiths, as if he had never seen them before." (VanderMeer 2002, 174)

"Between the domes, the fiery green glitter and minarets of the Religious Quarter[.]" (VanderMeer 2009, 13)

In the foreground of Figure 7, a tightly packed urban fabric with many small mosque-like structures—with a combination of domes and minarets—scattered among them emerges. While the residential buildings resembled the architectural styles, not of Byzantine or Ottoman, but of early republican Constantinople—note the cement-built facades, the tower on the right side of the image is a peculiar building with its extraordinary height and its style reminiscent of the dome in the background. The image most probably reflects a juxtaposition of Ambergris and Constantinople in their various periods but mostly later ones.

The third image output was stylistically the most distinct (Figure 8):

Figure 8.

Compare it, for instance, with these 16th–century Ottoman and 13th–century Byzantine depictions of Constantinople (Figure 9–10):

Figure 9. İstanbul, *Beyan-ı Menazil-i Sefer-i Irakeyn* (Matrakçı Nasuh 1537).

Figure 10. Hyperpyron of Michael VIII Palaiologos (1258-1282), reverse.
Virgin Mary within the walls of Constantinople. (Dumbarton Oaks Collection n.d.)

The software attempting to create a graphic novel manner by relying on the miniature form is interesting in itself. On the other hand, the prompt "Constantinople" might as well have triggered a miniature-like style, for both the Byzantines and Ottomans produced vast amounts of miniatures. Thus, the software opting for a miniature is not so outstanding. Here, too, residential areas are in the foreground, with multitudes of domes and spires—be it minarets or columns—dominating the background. In the foremost area, a dark blue and wavy patch suggested a body of water, and immediately on its banks, several human figures, distinct with their red *fes,* are depicted. This is unquestionably an Ottoman element and a 19–century one at that. In an 1829 regulatory law, *fes* were enforced to be worn (Uzunçarşılı 1954; Quataert 1997). In Ambergris, *Kalif*'s military officers wear a turban—another common head-dress worn by the Ottomans—but not *fes*. Above, dividing what seems to be the sky and a pitch-black line are pseudo-calligraphic scribbles, which, though including letters from probably Greek and Latin alphabets, do not mean anything. The presence of pseudo-calligraphy is not totally out of place, for it is common in city portraits and panoramas to include such "captions" as is the case with Figure 7 (Nuti 1994, 108).

In every instance, the software seems to concur following elements to be similar in both fictional Ambergris and historical Constantinople: a body

of water—be it *Moth*, Bosporus, or Golden Horn; domes and spires—be it minarets or columns; a monumental architectural structure. In contrast, nature shows itself only in the form of water and mist. However, on closer inspection, it might be said that Figure 8 features vegetation among the domes in the background. In addition, Figure 2 and 8 are suggestive of the *freshwater squid*'s anatomical influence on two architectural elements, on the domes of Figure 8 and one spire in Figure 2. Another rare occurrence of living is the people in the foreground of Figure 8. This very limited presence of the biosphere is surprising because Ambergris is depicted to be teeming with various organic life in all the novels, while Constantinople surely has never lacked such a presence. In each image, there is at least one instance of grotesque magnification of a monument. That might be rooted in the extreme anatomy of *freshwater squid* or from the *gray cap* tower, which has extraordinary size. Alternatively, the software conforming to a miniature style in Figure 8 can explain the emergence of these huge monuments. To put it simply, a miniature does not conform to a natural perspective, but features a hierarchical order of objects. In other words, it is natural in miniature for an important building to be larger in the frame, regardless of the perspective. This kind of influence would explain the huge tower in Figure 2 and the huge dome in Figure 5.

There is not a single graphic adaptation of Ambergris yet, but Constantinople found its way to this medium many times[3]. In addition, the Ambergris Cycle makes use of various art trends and mediums, architectural styles, and it even has a chapter written as a psudeo-art history–crime story (VanderMeer 2002, 129–181). For instance, it is surprising not to see the style of Martin Lake's (a fictional artist in the novels) depiction of the Post Office Building, which has a vivid and striking textual description[4] and can be considered the equivalent of Constantinople's Hagia Sophia in terms of its centrality

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[3] See, for instance: *Pilote* (1963); *Klassika* (1953); Yalaz (1963); Azzarello (2021).

[4] See, for instance "The astute observer will note that the Post Office walls in Lake's painting are created with careful crosshatching brushstrokes layered over a dampened whiteness. This whiteness, upon close examination, is composed of hundreds of bones—skulls, femurs, ribs—all compressed and rendered with a pathetic delicacy that astounds the eye." (VanderMeer 2002, 137).

in the city and historical depth. On the other hand, the building resembling Galata Tower in Figure 2 and the huge domes that found their way to every image are what seem to be Constantinopolitan influences. All in all, all the tangible architectural forms appear to be based on the data from Constantinople, while the manner in which they are presented is shaped by the vibe of the Ambergris novels. It is difficult to map out *Midjourney*'s choices thoroughly when it depicts things. However, with the given keywords and the contexts of these notions, the algorithm reveals its biases, how it understands Constantinople and Ambergris, and what it highlights when the two come together.

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