In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Special Introduction | Driver Martha Driver Pace University Writing About Medieval Movies: Authenticity and History

Why use film to teach students about the Middle Ages? Here are some reasons: in a culture that values the visual over the printed page, film keeps medieval history and heroes alive, topical, and under discussion, sometimes heated discussion. Film is a central part of our entertainment culture that involves a range of people, often our students, in formal and informal dialogues about moral and social issues. Film is interpretative, just as scholarship, history and primary sources themselves are interpretative. With film, in particular, one is generally conscious (if one is watching consciously) of intentional and unintentional anachronism, and the imposing of contemporary social or political values on the past. This might disturb the teacher of history or literature who hopes for more realistic or truer representation, for documentary rather than fantasy. Openness to a variety of presentations, however, whether of medieval works of art or of moments in medieval history or stories popular in the Middle Ages can freshen our historical
perspectives, awakening us as well to the cultural attitudes and agendas underpinning the interpretations. In other words, movies are multivalenced, telling us simultaneously about the distant past and about more recent events and social attitudes. This tendency to recast an older story in light of current tastes or to address contemporary issues under the guise of historical representation is not, in fact, new. When examining the illuminated pages of a medieval manuscript, the images are charming and sanitized, similar to the Book of Hours, for example the Très Riches Heures, the scrubbed version of historical films produced in Hollywood Grimani Breviary or the Da Costa Hours, deluxe manuscripts in the 1940s and 1950s, in which the Middle Ages are prescribed produced for wealthy patrons, we notice both realistic and non-realistic elements. Buildings and implements, inventions of representation, readily recognizable iconography, for instance, are often realistically rendered while the idealizations of social stereotypes were apparently as farming scenes that illustrate the calendar portions of these popular in the calendar pages of Books of Hours as they texts, the costumes of the peasants are brightly colored, the were to be later on film, types of visual shorthand promoting women's aprons, crisply white and clean. Their hands and idealized scenes of daily life. faces, no matter the task at hand, whether slaughtering or Compare, for example, the sweeping (and immaculate) grape-picking, appear freshly washed. Such pictures were, of stage sets of Sir Laurence Olivier's 1944 film of Henry V course, painted for the pleasure of the books' noble owners, with the muddy outdoor of Kenneth Branagh's 1989 Vol. 29.1-2(1999) 15 Driver! Special Introduction version. Olivier's film gives an idealized heroic account of the Battle of Agincourt, while Branagh's vision is more gruesome, violent, and to us, realistic, reflecting another stereotype that the Middle Ages were "dark, dirty, violent...unstable or threatening." 1 Just as our perceptions of realism, of historical-ness, in medieval art are shaped by visual conventions, so too with films. As film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum recently commented to me, "It doesn't matter if the historical details of the film are authentic. They just have to look authentic to the audience." 2 Authenticity is a convention of costume drama, part of the visual language in the re-creation of history on screen. Articles in these two volumes of the medieval issue of Film & History discuss the way in which various medieval tales or histories have found their way into twentieth-century film, the tensions between the medieval story and the way it has been imagined by the film-makers, and the uses teachers, students and scholars might make of these dialogues across time. In the opening essay in issue one, "Looking at the Middle Ages in the Cinema," David John Williams, one of the great writers on the subject of medieval movies, argues that film can stand as a kind of history alongside the writing of professional historians, giving us glimpses into the past, which is otherwise only available through texts, documents and artifacts. Film provides an imaginative immediacy and reality, a luminous world we physically enter by...
Writing About Medieval Movies: Authenticity and History

Why use film to teach students about the Middle Ages? Here are some reasons: in a culture that values the visual over the printed page, film keeps medieval history and heroes alive. Topical, and under discussion, sometimes heated discussion, film is a central part of our entertainment culture that involves a range of people, often our students, in formal and informal dialogues about moral and social issues. Film is interpretive, just as scholarship, history, and primary sources themselves are interpretive. With film, in particular, one is generally conscious (though not necessarily consciously) of intentional and unintentional anachronisms, and the imposing of contemporary social or political values on the past. This might disturb the teacher of history or literature who hopes for more realistic or true representation, for documentary rather than fantasy, openness in a variety of presentations. However, whether of medieval works of art or of moments in medieval history or stories popular in the Middle Ages can broaden our historical perspectives, awakening us as well to the cultural attitudes and agendas underlying the interpretations. In other words, movies are multivalent, telling us simultaneously about the distant past and about more recent events and social attitudes. This tendency to fuse an older story in light of current tastes is to address contemporary issues under the guise of historical representation is not, in fact, new.

When examining the illuminated pages of a medieval Book of Hours, for example the Très Riches Heures, the Girona Library at the Lluís VIVES, and the El Escorial Library at the Las Cataratas, Gelareh manuscripts produced for wealthy patrons, one notices both realistic details and idealized elements. Buildings and landscapes, for instance, are often schematically rendered while the figures are more fluid, allowing the illuminator to illustrate the calendar portion of these texts. The textures of the backgrounds are bright, vivid, and clear, with the world’s atoms sharply defined and clear. These hard and fast, no matter the task at hand, whether slaughtering or crop picking, appear freshly washed. Such pictures were, of course, painted for the pleasure of the book’s noble owners.

The images are charming and naturalistic, similar to the fractured vision of historical films produced in Hollywood in the 1940s and 1950s, in which the Middle Ages are presented as “bright, clear, noble, soaring, and smart.” In contrast, representations are often stylized, presenting anachronisms or stereotypes not popular in the calendar pages of Books of Hours where they were to be taken on film, types of visual shorthand interesting historical narratives of daily life.

Compare, for example, the moving and imaginative film versions of Simon Schuster’s 1954 film of the story with the roughly rendered footage of Kenneth Branagh’s 1989
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