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Writing About Medieval Movies: Authenticity and History

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Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies

Center for the Study of Film and History

Volume 29, Numbers 1-2, 1999

pp. 5-7

ARTICLE

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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 of 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 multivalent, 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 for wealthy patrons, we notice both realistic and idealized elements. Buildings and implements, conventions of representation, readily recognizable iconography, for instance, are often realistically rendered while in the reaffirmations 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, they 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 footage 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...

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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 true 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 of 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 multivalent, telling us simultaneously about the distant past and about more recent events and social attitudes. This tendency to read 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 Book of Hours, for example the *Très Riches Heures*, the *Grimani Bezaire* or the *Da Costa Hours*, deluxe manuscripts produced for wealthy patrons, we notice both realistic details and idealized elements. Buildings and implements, for instance, are often realistically rendered while the farming scenes that illustrate the calendar portions of these texts, the activities of the peasants are brightly colored, the women's attires crisply white and clean. Their hands and faces, no matter the task at hand, whether slaughtering or grape picking, appear freshly washed. Such pictures were, of course, painted for the pleasure of the books' noble owners.

The images are charming and sanitized, similar to the scrubbed version of historical films produced in Hollywood in the 1940s and 1950s, in which the Middle Ages are presented as "bright, clean, noble, exciting, and merry." Conventional representations, readily recognizable iconography, and reaffirmations of social stereotypes were apparently as popular in the calendar pages of Books of Hours as they were to be later on film, types of visual shorthand denoting idealized scenes of daily life.

Compare, for example, the swaying (and unswayed) stage sets of Sir Laurence Olivier's 1944 film of *Henry V* with the rustic outdoor footage of Kenneth Branagh's 1989

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