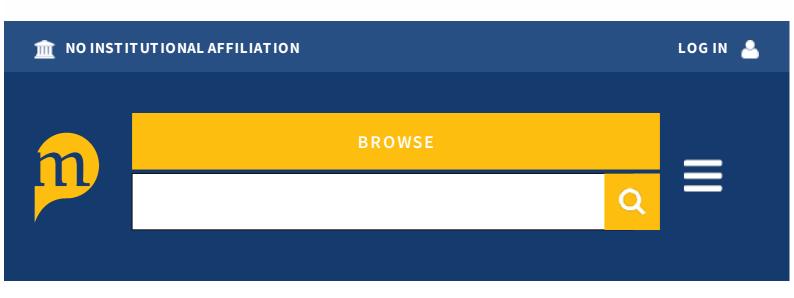
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Writing About Medieval Movies: Authenticity and History.



Writing About Medieval Movies: Authenticity and History

Mart ha Driver

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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 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 medievalThe 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 manu-in the 1940s and 1950s, in which the Middle Ages are
prescripts produced for wealthy patrons, we notice both realis-sented as "bright, clean, noble, sporting,
and merry." Contic details and idealized elements. Buildings and implements, ventions ofrepresentation,
readily recognizable iconography, for instance, are often realistically rendered while in the and
reaffirmations of social stere otypes were apparently as farming scenes that illustrate the calendar portions
of the sepopular 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 athand, whether
slaughtering orCompare, for example, the sweeping (and immaculate) grape-picking, appear freshly
was hed.Suchpictureswere,of stagesetsof SirLaurenceOlivier's1944filmof HenryVcourse,paintedforthenryCcourse,paintedforthenryCcourse,pai
pleasure ofthe books' noble owners.with the mu¿¿y out¿oor f00tage ofKenneth Branagh's 1989 Vol. 29.1-
2(1999) 15 Driver! Special Introduction version. Olivier's film gives an idealized heroic account of the Battle
ofAgincourt, while Branagh's vision is more gruesome, violent, and to us, realistic, reflecting another
stereotype that the Middle Ages were "dark, dirty, violentunstable 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 ofcostume drama, part of the visual language in the re-creation ofhistory on screen. Articles in
$these\ two\ volumes\ of the\ medievalissue\ of Film\ \&\ History\ discuss\ the\ way in\ which\ various\ medieval\ tales\ or$
histories have found their way into twe ntieth-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
$these\ dialogues\ across\ time.\ In\ the\ opening\ essay\ in\ issue\ one, "Looking\ at\ the\ Middle\ Ages\ in\ the\ Cinema,"$
$David\ John\ Williams, one\ of the\ great\ writers\ on\ the\ subject\ of\ me\ die\ val\ mo\ vies, argues\ that\ film\ can\ stand\ as$
a kind ofhistory 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

Martha Driver Pace University

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When mannining the 'llarrinated pages of a medieval Back of Huars, for example the 'line. R's hes Heuren, the Gairnani Braviscy of the Da Costa Hours, delate more scripts produced for wealthy patrons, we notice both realistic details and insulted elements. Buildings and incoherence, in testance, act often realistically sende ed while in the ferming somes that allowants the calendar permons of those tests, the concurrence of the presents are brightly on order the sentence are only the sentence are only white and clean. These backs and frees no matter the task as band, whether slaughtering or groupe picking, appear breakly washed. Such pieterns were, or course, painted for the pleasane of the books' noble owners.

The images are channing and sanitized, similar to the structed version of historical films produced in Hollywood in the 1940s and 1950s, in which the Middle Ages are presented as "bright, dean, mobile, ascertag, and merry." One was ions of representation, readily recognizable icomography, and realitymations of social stereocypes were apparently at popular in the caleman pages of Broks of Hours as they were to be latter on film, types of risual shorthead promising blooked scenes of fiabilities.

Compare, for example, the cocuping (and analous) of stage seas of Su Laurence Other's 1944 film at Heart V with the rendry condour footage of Kenneth Branagh's 1989.

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Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
+1 (410) 516-6989
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