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Cinema Arthuriana without Malory?: The International Reception of Fuqua, Franzoni, and Bruckheimer's *King Arthur* (2004)

JOSEPH M. SULLIVAN

Filmmakers deviate greatly from traditional Arthurian narrative, challenging the distinct expectations that each national audience brings to this most un-Malorian picture. (JMS)

Can there be successful cinema arthuriana without Malory? What happens when moviemakers retell the Arthurian story and largely ignore the legacy of England's great fifteenth-century romancier?¹

In early August 2004, Buena Vista, a division of Disney, released to worldwide audiences *King Arthur*, an interpretation of the Arthurian story from director Antoine Fuqua, screenwriter David Franzoni, and producer Jerry Bruckheimer that disposed with many of the literary and cinematic conventions traditionally associated with Arthurian myth and substituted in their stead a raw, bleak Arthurian world. While the film was a commercial failure in the United States, making only about half of what it cost to produce,² *King Arthur* was a rather robust box office success in the overseas market. Indeed, when one adds the overseas receipts to the domestic, the movie returned to the studio roughly twice as much as it had invested in it. Internationally, *King Arthur* was the twentieth most successful film of 2004, ranking only slightly behind Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* in seventeenth place and right in front of *Oceans Twelve* at twenty-first.³ Thus, *King Arthur* made a very respectable showing globally, at least in financial terms.

Research for this essay, which investigates the international reception of this most un-Malorian interpretation of the Arthurian story, consisted of the survey of several hundred articles from the international popular press—primarily movie reviews aimed at consumers but also review articles from film industry watchers that assessed the commercial potential of *King Arthur*. Based on all those articles, the essay proposes why the movie did so abysmally in some markets and so well in others. The article addresses, first, the reception of the film in the English-speaking markets of North America and the United Kingdom, where the movie did poorly at the box office, before turning to Germany and France, respectively, where the film was—as was the case across continental Europe—a resounding financial success. Lastly, it considers whether audiences internationally discerned a political or ideological

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message in the film, whether that message was a message actually intended by the filmmakers, and if the perceived presence of a message played any role in audience acceptance or rejection of *King Arthur*.

It will be shown that the film's success and failure in the markets considered was largely a result of specific expectations that audiences brought to the film. More particularly, in markets where audiences identified especially strongly with that version of the Arthurian legend that has come into modern culture primarily through Malory's vision of the story, the film did poorly both in financial and critical senses. Conversely, the film did better in areas where the emotional and historical attachment to Malorian Arthuriana has not been as great.

The newspaper, magazine, and increasingly prevalent internet periodical movie review offers scholars what is arguably the best source for assessing audience reaction to *King Arthur*, or for that matter, any current film. As the noted film critic John Simon has observed, newspaper editors, for their part, seek in their reviewers writers who can anticipate what the average viewer will think of a film,⁴ that is, editors look for individuals who can tell the would-be consumer what he or she will find acceptable in a movie and what will come across as objectionable, ridiculous, or simply boring. Thus reviews, to a greater extent than perhaps any other source, express the spectrum of reaction of the particular national audiences for which they are written. Furthermore, since popular-press reviews appear simultaneously with a movie's release, they provide a reception snapshot of a specific moment, unadulterated by the critical distance that comes with time and which sometimes leads to an altered appreciation of a film. Additionally, the movie review has become in the last half-century such an ubiquitous part of the popular press internationally, that it is possible to survey a large number of reviews for any given film, thus allowing one to get a fairly accurate picture of what the most typical reactions to a film in a particular national culture are. Indeed, especially in areas like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany, the review is not only an omnipresent genre but is also, typically, relatively long and detailed. As such, it affords the scholar a highly informative window onto how audiences in those areas receive individual films.⁵

The sheer volume of reviews for any particular film, however, and their increasingly easy availability especially via the internet also poses for the researcher its own unique problems. Indeed, it is possible to find for any given national market virtually every conceivable gradation of positive and negative reaction to a picture. This essay tries, therefore, to find a critical center-of-mass for its findings about *King Arthur* reception in each of the national markets it considers and endeavors to cite reactions that are typical of those across the reviews surveyed for a particular country.

For *King Arthur*, a common denominator in reviews in the popular press across all areas where the film was released was commentary about its closeness to traditional Arthurian legend à la Malory and its claim to historical accuracy. Let us take a look, therefore, first at the North American market, where the film did not do well, to see how those two criteria manifested themselves in reviewer reaction to the picture.

NORTH AMERICA

Featuring centrally in North American promotions for the film, such as posters, trailers, and the official *King Arthur* internet site, were claims to historical accuracy. The movie's DVD packaging, for instance, announces the film is 'The untold true story that inspired the legend.'⁶ Similarly, the tableau that opens the picture states that 'Recently discovered archeological evidence' underpins this story of Arthur, that is, the historical Arthur behind the myth. This true Arthur, the audience learns in the beginning sequences of the film, is a half-Briton, half-Roman, who in the last days of the Roman occupation of Britain leads a band of exiled Sarmatian knights, namely, the Knights of the Round Table. While North American reviewers found much objectionable in the film, interestingly, only a small number took even minor issue with the claim to historical accuracy. Typical of those reacting with modest suspicion, Sun Media's Roger Ebert raised and dismissed the claim with the incredulous and rather pithy comment, 'Uh, huh.'⁷ Most U.S. and Canadian reviewers, however, had no difficulty getting past the assertion of historical accuracy. For example, a writer for the Hollywood trade journal *Variety* noted that 'this telling is as credible as any other,'⁸ and *The New York Times* derogated the issue to others to squabble over, adding, 'Historians will debate the veracity of all this, assuming they have nothing better to do.'⁹ And in a comment that conveyed the indifference of American viewers and, arguably, their lack of historical and Arthurian literacy,¹⁰ a writer for the trade publication *Film Journal International* even stated, 'The big plus is that they [i.e. the audience] may learn a little something about ancient history along the way.'¹¹

But while North American reviewers had little difficulty accepting the film's take on history, they were almost universally displeased with its handling of conventions typical of interpretations of Arthuriana on film, conventions themselves that arguably follow that version of the Arthurian legend that Malory has bequeathed the modern world. Characteristic of North American press reactions about the legendary Arthurian elements it noted as missing in this rather unromantic movie, *Variety* identified the absence of 'a bucolic world of chivalrous knights, a mischievous magician [i.e. Merlin, who in the film becomes a thoroughly non-magical guerilla leader], and an errant queen [i.e. Guinevere].'¹² Indeed, disappointed expectations about the



Figure 1: Clive Owen: a 'Paxil-resistant' Arthur

circumscription of Guinevere's amatory attentions to Arthur alone—these two come together in what the *Wall Street Journal* derided as 'one of the oddest boy-meets-girl scenes in movie history'¹³—figured prominently in most reviews. For example, *Newsweek* subtitled its review 'This listless King Arthur even lacks a love triangle' and noted that the film drastically diminishes Lancelot's traditional, adulterous role;¹⁴ in *King Arthur*, the famous lover is reduced to the recipient of a single salacious glance from a bathing Guinevere.¹⁵

While reviewers' expectations were disappointed in a picture 'deprived of magic, stripped of romance,'¹⁶ both of the amorous and chivalric kinds, it was in an expectation that this essay will, for the sake of convenience, call brightness that they were most let down. More specifically, American reviewers betrayed an expectation that an Arthurian picture convey a kind of lightness, a joy both in its scenery and cinematography as well as in the emotional relationships and behavior of the *dramatis personae*. In *King Arthur*, such brightness is scarce. Thus nearly all North American reviewers noted the tiring ubiquity of overcast skies. For example, *Time* magazine commented, 'The weather is always inclement, the protagonists are all muddy when they're

not bloody.¹⁷ And *Newsweek*, which registered that 'the cinematography is dark and depressing' in this 'weatherman's film,' cleverly jibed that 'there's so much mist... that you'll swear they've moved the story from Camelot to San Francisco.'¹⁸

Complementing such cinematographic darkness is the brutality of combat—a portrayal of violence that North American reviewers, and reviewers everywhere (with the notable exception of France), found over-the-top and depressingly excessive. Such brutality led *The Toronto Star* to characterize the film as 'two hours of relentless battle,' *The New York Times* to call it a 'bloody retelling' of the Arthurian story, the *Wall Street Journal* to criticize it as 'tediously violent,' and *The Toronto Sun* to propose, in very tongue-in-cheek fashion, 'It's like a dinner at Medieval Times, only with blood and guts.'¹⁹

Lastly, a further element transgressed expectations of brightness for North American reviewers, namely, the heavy, profoundly serious performances of the actors. *Newsweek*, for instance, bemoaned that 'almost no one smiles' among the major characters; *Entertainment Weekly* lamented the 'Paxil-resistant melancholy' of the film's star, Clive Owen, in his portrayal of Arthur (Fig. 1); and *Time* magazine conveyed its disappointed expectation of lightness with the remark that films like *King Arthur* do not benefit from such 'actors lugubriously acting' but instead need 'flash, sass and genial trash.'²⁰

THE UNITED KINGDOM

In the United Kingdom, critical and popular reception was even more unfavorable than in North America. At the British box office, the film rapidly fell from the number two position during the week of its release to seventh position in its third week.²¹ In North America, reviewers and film industry watchers had couched their harshest disapproval of *King Arthur* primarily in financial, commercial terms. For instance, *Variety* labeled the film a 'domestic also-ran,' and the *Wall Street Journal* placed it alongside *Troy* and Steven Spielberg's *The Terminal* with the 'duds of summer' for 2004.²² Similarly, *The New York Times* ranked it among that 'movie season's biggest disappointments' and characterized it with *Around the World in 80 Days* as one of Disney's 'two pricey bombs' of summer.²³ By contrast, British reviewers reacted viscerally with a type of moral rectitude that is perhaps best described as disgust. Such disgust lay both in a perceived insult that the film made toward an Arthurian story the British identify as patrimony and in disappointed expectations of what of an Arthurian film should be.

While the expectations of British reviewers did not revolve to the same extent as those of American reviewers around brightness, British reviewers did generally articulate expectations about the basic storyline of the Arthurian legend quite similar in overall tenor to those of their North American counterparts. Typically, however, their references to the Arthurian story

were more detailed and indicated a more profound engagement with, and expectation of, orthodox Maloriana than was the case among the North American counterparts. Thus, in a not atypical discussion of the film, a *Times* of London writer recounts the very Malorian elements of the story that the film modifies or deletes, including Arthur's youth 'in obscurity,' 'drawing a magical sword from a stone,' his fight 'to supreme and unchallenged power with the aid of a wizard,' the fairy-like Lady of the Lake, the rise of the Round Table, the 'quest for the Holy Grail,' Arthur's betrayal by his wife Guinevere and 'his best friend,' Lancelot, the betrayal by his nephew Mordred, civil war, his conveyance after death to 'an immortal realm,' and his possible return some day 'when his kingdom needs him again.'²⁴ In short, the writer rehearses the classic version of the story that Malory, probably more than any other medieval writer, transmits to modernity, albeit through many nineteenth- and twentieth-century visual artists, writers, and filmmakers.²⁵

Another *Times* writer predicted what such transgression of orthodox Maloriana would mean: 'The expectations that many will bring to the theatre will be profoundly disappointed, as this film has as much to do with the myth of King Arthur as *The Stepford Wives* has to do with feminism.'²⁶

While in North America the claim to historical accuracy had been essentially a non-issue, in the UK, that claim was taken seriously and ultimately compounded the film's unfavorable reception. In general, the British press simply devoted more space to the matter with, for instance, a greater frequency of pieces featuring the film's writer, David Franzoni, and its historical consultant, English popular writer John Matthews. In such articles, screenwriter and consultant emerged sincere and thoroughly conscientious in their belief in the basic historical elements that the film portrays.²⁷ Thus Matthews told Edinburgh's *Evening News*, 'When I started work on the movie two years ago I was aware of the theory [i.e. of Lucius Artorius Castus and the Sarmatian knights as the historical antecedents for Arthur and his Round Table] but wasn't sure of it.' Matthews, however, went on to add, 'I have now found so much evidence that links Arthur with this part of the world [i.e. Hadrian's Wall, northern England, and southern Scotland] that I am completely convinced by it.'²⁸

Despite such sincerity, many reviewers were unable to reconcile *King Arthur's* claims with their own conceptions of whatever Arthurian history might be. Thus the *Guardian* reacted to the film's portrayal of itself as based on recent archaeological findings by calling it 'pseudo-historical garbage' and 'one of the worst historical, or history-esque, films ever made.'²⁹ And a *Times* writer derisively suggested that using such questionable evidence to claim 'this Arthur more authentic than any other' is tantamount to proclaiming that 'a unicorn is more realistic than a hippogriff.'³⁰

Such discontent also found expression among the broader British public when one movie-goer lodged a formal complaint with the UK's Advertising Standards Authority alleging that marketing *King Arthur* as faithful to history was essentially false advertising.³¹ The ASA dismissed that complaint only after what *The Times*—with a healthy dose of mischievous sarcasm—characterized as 'drawn-out negotiations.'³²

What arguably contributed most greatly, however, to the much harsher critical reaction to the film in the UK than in North America is the greater attachment among the British to the legend of King Arthur as part of national identity. That view of Arthur as patrimony was reflected strongly in press comments after, as well as before, the movie's release. Indeed, the British press was participant in an atmosphere of great anticipation in the UK prior to the film's opening. Thus not only did a relatively great number of short articles appear about the movie's mostly British actors, but also the press produced lengthy articles from the set in Ireland—the largest ever built in that country—and pieces about the picture's modification of Arthurian myth.³³ For instance, *The Times* commented that the film, 'which opens next week, has spawned extensive analysis of the place of the Arthurian legend in our cultural landscape,' adding that it 'reignites interest in medieval jousting tournaments.'³⁴ Even the English tourist board got on the bandwagon and anticipated the movie's release with 'a *King Arthur* Movie Map highlighting places to visit connected to the legend of King Arthur.'³⁵

Such anticipation of a film that might have presented an Arthur sufficiently consonant with the legendary figure so central to national identity only seems to have exacerbated what became a violent critical backlash upon the film's release in a country where, according to a 2004 'survey of the historical knowledge of the average adult' reported in *The Independent*, a full fifty-seven percent of the population believe that an actual, historical King Arthur existed.³⁶ Thus *The Times* suggested British custodianship of Arthurian myth when it noted the suspicion that arose in the UK, 'when Antoine Fuqua—a directorial graduate of the Oscar-winning *Training Day* and a Yank to boot—announced his revisionist overhaul of the Arthurian legend.'³⁷ And, in language arguably redolent of nationalism, the *Evening Times* of Glasgow remarked of director Fuqua that he, 'an urban black filmmaker, is as out of touch with the material as that nice Jewish boy Jonathan Lynn was in making the gospel musical *The Fighting Temptations*.'³⁸ Perhaps the liberal *Guardian*, however, was strongest in its condemnation of the film as desecration of British intellectual property when it labeled the picture 'a national insult' and asserted that, with its release, 'Britain's national myth has suffered its own catastrophe.'³⁹

GERMANY

On the continent, meanwhile, the film would do much better among reviewers and become a resounding commercial success. This alternate response was nowhere more true than in the very large cinema market of Germany where *King Arthur* remained among the top two box office draws during its first three weeks.⁴⁰ While German reviewers were, on the whole, by no means ecstatic about a film they saw as very average fare, their reactions differed greatly in kind from the indignation of their British counterparts who had seen the movie as 'sacrilege, almost blasphemy' of Arthuriana and who had labeled it 'dumb,' 'dreadful,' 'just boring beyond belief... [and]... Complete nonsense from start to finish.'⁴¹ In the much less acerbic reception of the picture in the German-language press, one perceives a national culture whose expectations are less rigidly constrained by the reception of the Arthurian storyline à la Malory and a society with little interest in the defense of conventional Arthuriana.

Indeed, while the tradition of Arthurian literature was probably as strong in German-speaking areas in the Middle Ages as it was in medieval Britain, the modern German popular press acknowledges all too readily the Arthurian story as 'Englands Gründungsmythos,' that is, as the 'foundational myth of England,' and exhibits but scant national ownership in that myth.⁴² Such absence of proprietary sentiment was evident in the German press reaction both to King Arthur's claim of historical accuracy and to its modification of Arthurian legend—a reaction that is probably best characterized as acceptance.

As regards the film's historical claims, German reviewers, like their British counterparts, put little stock in their actual truth. For example, the major national daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* opined, 'we don't believe a single word. We would even bet that no serious historian would stand behind the facts in this film.'⁴³ Unlike UK reviewers, however, German reviewers took little offence at perceived corruption of history. Quite to the contrary, among members of the German press there was a pronounced delight in discovering and unmasking the artifice behind the Hollywood movie-making machine. Thus the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* continued that the claim to historical truth was simply 'an ancient, long-known phenomenon—Hollywood's longing to stamp its material with the seal of historical correctness.'⁴⁴ Taking similar relish in exposing 'the old laws of filmic illusion' operating in *King Arthur*,⁴⁵ a reviewer for the national daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine* instructed readers, 'A history film is... about as good as its historical falsifications, the lies that it allows itself.'⁴⁶ Thus for this reviewer there is nothing unusual or particularly objectionable about contravening historical fact on film, although he did go on to add that the specific historical forgeries of which the makers of

King Arthur availed themselves served to smother much of the compelling emotional 'turbulence of hearts and souls' that Arthurian legend makes available to its modern interpreters.⁴⁷

General acceptance, moreover, also characterized German-press attitude toward the filmmakers' drastic modification of the Malorian storyline. That is not to say that German reviewers did not exhibit some of the same Arthurian expectations that their American and British counterparts had, that their conception of the Arthurian story was not also influenced more by Malory than by any other source. Indeed, German reviewers too betrayed a primary knowledge of Arthuriana gleaned through the same Malory-based movies, television shows, comics, fantasy literature, and other (especially twentieth-century) popular interpretations that so greatly inform American and British conceptions of the legend. Importantly, however, German reviewers referred far more infrequently to those specific expectations, suggesting, if not a lesser knowledge of Maloriana, then certainly a lack of reverence toward the Malorian storyline. Thus the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, while it generally considered the movie just another average, 'quickly to be forgotten new version of the material,' liked the very un-Malorian addition to Arthurian England of a Roman 'Imperium tired by its administrative role.'⁴⁸ And the national daily *Die Welt*, although it judged that the movie was ultimately less compelling than many a more traditional interpretation, nevertheless granted of the enterprise to reinvent the traditional Arthurian storyline, that it, at least in theory, 'Sounds good.'⁴⁹

Additionally, among the German reviewers there was little expectation of that brightness, cinematographic and emotional, that had become the focal point of so much disappointment among the North Americans. Thus the left-leaning national daily *Die Tageszeitung* favorably reacted to the 'thick fog over the battle scenes, which somehow lends greatly to the overall atmosphere of the film.'⁵⁰ Furthermore, German reviewers, along with reviewers from across the continent, exhibited little disapproval of the cast's dark, heavy acting, with the city daily *Hamburger Abendblatt*, for instance, even seeing the film's major 'strengths' in the characters' presentations of themselves.⁵¹

FRANCE

In general, the French language popular press movie review essay is a much briefer genre than that practiced in, for example, the German- and English-speaking countries. Additionally, a relatively small proportion of French periodical publications actually produce independent reviews to coincide with the release of new films. Nevertheless, the fact that *King Arthur* was a major release meant that French reviewers covered it in sufficient numbers to allow us to identify some distinct trends in their opinions. (To complement some of its observations about French reaction, this essay also considers a number

of reviews from the popular press of neighboring Francophone Switzerland.) Significantly, reactions of French reviewers were quite similar to those of their continental cousins, the Germans.

As in Germany, *King Arthur* did fairly well at the box office, occupying the position of the most seen film for its first two weeks,⁵² and as was also the case in Germany, the French periodical press, as a whole, gave the production a respectable, that is to say, average rating. Thus on the French *AlloCiné* movie website, which converts reviewer appraisals that have appeared in the popular press to scores on a scale of zero to four stars, *King Arthur* averaged two stars among the nine reviews the site considered.⁵³ In France, critical opinion was characterized by a relatively even distribution across a spectrum of very positive and very negative estimations of the picture.

In the context of *King Arthur*'s international reception, French reviews—including even the more negative reviews—are as interesting for what they did not contain as for what they did; specifically, there was a general absence of the highly emotional language that characterized especially the reactions of British reviewers to the filmmakers' unconventional approach to the material. Thus even among those French reviewers who were unimpressed with *King Arthur*, the harsh language of the Breton daily *Le Télégramme*—which labeled the film 'toc,' that is, 'trash'—was exceptional.⁵⁴ Indeed, French reviewer reaction betrayed an attitude toward orthodox, Malorian Arthuriana that might best be described as neutrality.

Such neutrality is evident in the indifference of French reviewers to *King Arthur*'s claim to historical accuracy. As with their North American and German counterparts, that claim was among French reviewers essentially a non-issue. In fact, even the small number of reviewers who expressed distrust—such as a *Le Télégramme* writer who judged that 'one has a hard time believing it' and a reviewer for the French-language Swiss daily *Le Temps* who asserted, 'The film, with its historical pretensions, is laughable'—typically did not bother to substantiate why they felt the claim questionable.⁵⁵

Rather than expressing dissatisfaction with the movie's historical approach to the material, French reviewers most characteristically reacted positively to the idea of presenting a historical rather than legendary Arthurian world. For instance, a reviewer for the daily *Le Parisien* praised as 'interesting' the filmmakers' stand 'to go beyond the legend in order to render homage to [the historical] Lucius Artorius Castus.'⁵⁶ Even reviewers who ultimately felt the filmmakers unsuccessful in creating good entertainment with their historical approach typically found merit in the basic idea. Thus a writer for the *Sud Ouest* newspaper group, while noting in his highly negative review that *King Arthur*'s 'mania for historical detail' was no substitute for Arthurian fantasy, begrudgingly acknowledged the moviemakers's 'risk taking' in pursuit 'of historical realism on a grand scale.'⁵⁷ And in another unfavorable review, a



Figure 2: Ioan Gruffud's Lancelot wielding his signature dual swords.

writer for the online film magazine *mcinema.com* praised the 'ambition of this production...to revisit the myth of King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table and to purify this legend of all its mystical and magical elements,' before lamenting, 'that which could have been a great epic film' simply did not live up to the potential its bold historical approach afforded it.⁵⁸

Like their Teutonic counterparts, French reviewers also exhibited little expectation of brightness and, indeed, generally reacted favorably to the film's heavy acting and gloomy cinematography. For example, a writer for the Pas-de-Calais daily *Voix du Nord* started a quite positive review by noting excitedly of the production, 'Elle a du chien,' that is, 'It has really nasty weather,' and went on to praise the presence in this foggy world of 'a bitter taste underscored by the twilight-like tonality of astounding photography.'⁵⁹ Such favorable estimation of darkness in the film's cinematography corresponded to an almost uniformly positive regard among French reviewers for the anything but lighthearted performances of the major characters. Thus *Le Figaro* remarked that 'Clive Owen makes a very captivating Arthur, with his serious glance and his thoughtful courage,' the *Voix du Nord* praised his Arthur as 'A staunch and melancholy soldier,' and the Swiss-French *Le Temps* commended 'His impressive authority,' while *Le Parisien* admired in Ioan Gruffud's sullen Lancelot character 'a certain disoriented fragility' (Fig. 2).⁶⁰

Conspicuously underrepresented among French reviews was reference to the medieval Arthurian literary tradition. Despite the fact that French-speaking Europe was the cradle of Arthurian romance, only one modern French review considered for this essay mentioned that heritage; more specifically, a short film notice in the weekly *Le Point* remarked simply that with *King Arthur* 'one is far from Chrétien de Troyes.'⁶¹ Furthermore, none of the French reviews considered here mentioned Malory and none referred to the Arthurian story as part of the British patrimony. Thus for the public in modern France and Francophone Europe—or at least for its film

reviewers—Arthur and Arthuriana seem to have become more detached from older literary and national traditions than is the case for the other markets evaluated here. Indeed, Arthurian points of reference for the reviewers of French-speaking Europe were largely cinematic with, for example, reviewers for France's Sud Ouest group, *Le Télégramme*, and the Swiss daily *La Liberté* comparing *King Arthur* to Boorman's *Excalibur*.⁶² Significantly, reviewers characterized the movie less according to its participation in the Arthurian tradition and more as a subgenre of modern film, namely, the spectacle film. Thus for *Le Figaro* it was a 'spectacle,' for the *Voix du Nord* it was 'this American super-production,' and for *Le Parisien* it was an 'impressive and beautiful spectacle.'⁶³

REVIEWERS AND A POLITICAL MESSAGE

Among the relatively small proportion of reviews appearing internationally that addressed the existence of a political or ideological message in the movie, two suggestions of what that message might be were most prevalent. First, some reviewers remarked on the unmistakable presence in *King Arthur* of a simple discourse on freedom, with the *Voix du Nord*, for example, declaring the existence in the film of 'a beautiful hymn to liberty' and *The Times* noting that in showcasing freedom the film allowed Arthur's knights to 'fight for the one value that works for all modern audiences.'⁶⁴ Second, a number of reviewers saw in the movie a glorification of specifically American political values, especially those that the administration of George W. Bush has come to symbolize for the international community in the wake of 9/11 and the American intervention in Iraq. Thus the Mexican daily *El Norte* ventured that the film's 'great big political discourse about liberty appears to be that of any current North American [i.e. US] military member,' *Le Point* claimed to detect 'a very Bushian discourse of liberation by arms,' and the Netherlands daily *Leeuwarder Courant* found Arthur's 'mouth so full of personal freedom and liberation that George Bush would nod in approval.'⁶⁵ For its part, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* opined that the filmmakers wished to send 'a message to the peoples of the world' that 'even if the rule of the empire [i.e. modern America] is terrible, the true terror begins when this empire leaves the stage.'⁶⁶ Similarly, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* saw the movie as propagating a distinctly pro-American, post-9/11 message. It remarked, 'In *King Arthur*, everybody is in reality an American,' with the film promoting Washington's current political credo 'that freedom, equality, and the pursuit of happiness may not be limited by some mullah or dictator with a claim of different cultural or religious conditions.'⁶⁷

In such conjectures about the film's pro-USA message, reviewers were mostly unsuccessful in discerning the filmmakers' actual political and ideological agendas. Part of that difficulty was certainly attributable to the

fact that *King Arthur* was a collaborative project, with no single auteur, or creative controlling force, behind the picture defining its ideological direction. Instead producer Jerry Bruckheimer and, in particular, writer David Franzoni and director Antoine Fuqua each contributed to the final product and its messages.

In the willingness of reviewers to see a pro-American, pro-Bush, or even pro-military message, their sentiments accorded most greatly with Jerry Bruckheimer's vision. In his statements to the press, Bruckheimer, a 'staunch Republican,'⁶⁸ located the film's essence in the actions of Arthur and his knights, in whom Bruckheimer saw an affirmation of values important to him—values that one may argue are traditionally American. Thus for Bruckheimer, the Round Table Knights 'are like [US Army] Special Forces, wherever they are now, fighting for another country. It's heroism, camaraderie, brotherhood. They are fighting for what they believe in, for the moral high ground—all the kinds of themes I love.'⁶⁹ While *King Arthur* would likely never have been made if Bruckheimer had not signed on to the project and although most reviewers who disliked the film blamed Bruckheimer's predilection for the cheapest Hollywood-style sensationalism, it is easy to place too much emphasis on his contribution in defining the film and its messages. Indeed, while Bruckheimer does typically involve himself at some important points in a movie project, such as choosing writers and casting, 'He devotes [his] particular attention to post-production and marketing.'⁷⁰ Although with *King Arthur* Bruckheimer was more involved than usual, especially in redefining the film's original ending,⁷¹ the director and writer arguably played the more important roles in framing the movie's political, ideological messages.

Significantly, writer David Franzoni's political intent differed radically from the reviewers' readings. Whereas reviewers interpreted the film as supporting American expansionism and identified that message as belonging to the post-9/11, Iraqi War political climate, Franzoni's actual intent was distinctly anti-war and anti-expansionist and was anchored in the pre-9/11 world. Thus while the writer did see parallels between Rome's situation in his screenplay and that of the United States in Iraq,⁷² as Franzoni told *The New York Times*, he intended his screenplay—which was incidentally written before 9/11 and pitched to Bruckheimer in summer 2000—primarily as 'an allegory for the Vietnam War.'⁷³ Franzoni, who opposed that conflict, made his distaste for American expansionism clear in an interview with the Dutch national daily *De Telegraaf*: 'Between the Americans and the Romans there is no difference. With the best intentions they come to a country to free it from the barbarians. But soon the problems start. They don't understand the other culture. And they need violence to establish their leadership. They

torture and humiliate their prisoners of war. And the barbarians, in their turn, decapitate their hostages.⁷⁴

While director Antoine Fuqua's political vision with *King Arthur* was less rooted than Franzoni's in a specific conflict, he shared the screenwriter's general agenda of projecting an anti-war message. Fuqua's primary contribution to promoting that message was the massive infusion into the film of raw violence and death. Reviewers, who almost everywhere found that violence excessive and who saw in it an all-too-typical Hollywood attempt to pander to lovers of sensationalism, misinterpreted Fuqua's intent. As the director explained to the *De Telegraaf*, 'I filmed all the atrocities... , because only in this way could I demonstrate the liberators' dilemma.'⁷⁵ And as he related to the *Hamburger Abendblatt*, he included the violence, 'Because war is just horrible.'⁷⁶

At the time of the film's release, Fuqua widely publicized his dissatisfaction with the finished project, about which he commented, 'I saw the film slip out of my fingers' during the final stages of production and editing.'⁷⁷ After screenings with test audiences that found the movie's ending with Lancelot's death to be too dour, Bruckheimer had Franzoni film a happy ending featuring Arthur and Guinevere's marriage. Additionally, in order to secure a family-friendly PG rating and thus attract a larger audience, Fuqua was forced to edit out much of the violence, an action that he deemed undercut both the film's anti-violence message as well as its commitment to historical authenticity. As he complained in *Variety*, 'I mean, it's set in the Dark Ages, when people were inconsiderate and decided to bleed everywhere.'⁷⁸

Given that reviewers so roundly misunderstood Fuqua's reason for including so much gore in the version that actually made it to theaters, it seems highly unlikely that leaving in all the violence that Fuqua originally included—and which can be seen in the DVD director's cut version—would have made the film more acceptable to reviewers or its political messages more clear.

While consideration of the political ideology (or ideologies) that went into creating the movie will undoubtedly form a productive part of future investigations by professional Arthurian scholars, popular press reviews indicate the film's political agenda did not constitute a significant consideration for the viewing public anywhere. Importantly, only a relatively small proportion of reviews remarked on the political direction of the film. Of those reviews, even the longer ones typically supplied little more detail about such political direction than to suggest its presence. Arguably, many reviewers felt too confused about what the film was actually trying to say politically. As Susan Aronstein has recently noted of the picture's lack of ideological clarity, *King Arthur* is 'a movie at war with itself, vacillating between a critique of the

ideological agendas that have...traditionally appropriated Arthurian myth and a mythological endorsement of the very ideologies it critiques.⁷⁹

A more prosaic but equally plausible explanation, moreover, for the brevity and the scarcity of reviewer comment about the film's political agenda(s) is that most reviewers simply deemed the political aspects of the film to be of little interest to their readers and to moviegoers in general.

Such virtual non-existence of a political message in the considerations of reviewers and their readers likely contributed to the financial success of the film in markets outside the USA. Indeed, Hollywood is well aware that making movies featuring subjects and outlooks that are too readily identifiable with American culture and values can jeopardize success overseas where audiences react more favorably to productions with universal themes.⁸⁰ Certainly, *King Arthur's* creators could have stated more explicitly a political message. That Disney and the filmmakers did not do so, whether through deliberate decision or otherwise, must be considered a highly fortunate marketing move.

So let us now, in conclusion, return to our original question of whether there can be a successful retelling of the Arthurian story without extensive reliance upon Malory. If the film industry were marketing only to English-speaking audiences, among whom the film was a financial disaster, that answer would probably be no. As we have seen, North American and British reviewers reacted most unfavorably to Bruckheimer, Fuqua, and Franzoni's very un-Malorian interpretation of Arthurian legend, a disapproval that manifested itself in mention of the filmmaker's transgressions against those parts of the legend that have come into modern popular culture largely through the influence of Malory. But since the film industry is not marketing only to English-speaking audiences and is instead producing products for an international clientele, we cannot be so definite in our answer. Indeed, international audiences allowed the studio to recoup twice as much money as it had invested in *King Arthur*—a success by almost any commercial standard. And, as we have seen with the examples of the German and French popular presses, reviewers outside the English-speaking world showed little emotional attachment to orthodox Maloriana and generally liked the idea of tampering with the legend.

Nevertheless, one cannot help imagining that the film would have done well not only in non-English-speaking markets, like continental Europe, but also in English-speaking areas if it had steered much closer to Malory. In other words, the filmmakers sacrificed the allegiance, dollars, and pounds of English-speaking viewers in giving up Malory. Since big-budget popular film has so much to do with turning the highest profit possible, it is probably reasonable to conclude that no studio in the near future will again go so far in writing Malory out of its own interpretation of Arthurian legend. Thus, while there certainly can be cinema Arthuriana, and even successful cinema

arthuriana without Malory, it seems highly unlikely that we are to see it again any time soon on such a grand and costly scale.

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NOTES

- 1 This essay originated as a paper presented in 2005 at the 40th International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, Michigan, in the session 'Screening Malory (!?)' organized by Kevin J. Harty. The term 'cinema arthuriana' also belongs to Harty.
- 2 The studio spent about \$100 million dollars on *King Arthur* and took in domestically about \$51 million. Sharon Waxman, 'Summer Box Office Hits a High, Despite Lows,' *The New York Times* (September 7, 2004): E6.
- 3 Anthony D'Alessandro, '2004 Top 125 Worldwide,' *Variety* (January 17, 2005): 10.
- 4 John Simon, 'A Critical Credo,' in *Awake in the Dark: An Anthology of American Film Criticism, 1915 to the Present*, ed. David Denby (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), p. 171 [169–82].
- 5 Unfortunately, the periodical film review is not a prevalent genre in all cultures where Arthuriana is popular. For example, in Japan—a national market that I had hoped originally to include in this essay—the movie review does not appear to be widely practiced by professional journalists.
- 6 *King Arthur: Director's Cut*, director Antoine Fuqua, performers Clive Owen, Keira Knightley, Ioan Gruffud, and Stellan Skarsgård, DVD, Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2004.
- 7 Roger Ebert, 'Dark & Stormy Knight: Legend Gives Way to the Man in Take on King Arthur,' *The Ottawa Sun* (July 7, 2004): 27.
- 8 Todd McCarthy, 'The Knights Get Colder,' *Variety* (July 12, 2004): 30.
- 9 O. Scott, 'The Once and Future Fury: These Knights Go for the Jugular,' *The New York Times* (July 7, 2004): E1.
- 10 I am not suggesting here that Arthurian legend is not absolutely central to American popular culture but merely that Americans do not appear to share a uniform idea of its historical basis or the elements that constitute it. For the profound permeation of Arthuriana into American culture, see Alan Lupack and Barbara Tapa Lupack, *Arthur in America* (Woodbridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1999).
- 11 Shirley Sealy, review of *King Arthur*, *Film Journal International* 107 (August 2004): 52.
- 12 McCarthy, 'Knights Get Colder,' 22.
- 13 Joe Morgenstern, 'Royal Shame: *King Arthur* Tries to Light Up Dark Ages, But Lacks Magic, Romance,' *Wall Street Journal* (July 9, 2004): W1.

- 14 Marc Peyser, 'Knight of the Living Dead: This listless *King Arthur* even lacks a love triangle,' *Newsweek* 144 (July 12, 2004): 60.
- 15 For an excellent treatment of the creation, marketing, and reception of the film's Guinevere character, see Virginia Blanton, "'Don't worry, I won't let them rape you": Guinevere's Agency in Jerry Bruckheimer's *King Arthur*,' *ARTHURIANA* 15.3 (Fall 2005): 91–111.
- 16 Morgenstern, 'Royal Shame,' W1.
- 17 Richard Schickel, 'Dark Knights: *King Arthur* has too few shining moments,' *Time* 164 (July 19, 2004): 77.
- 18 Peyser, 'Knight of the Living Dead,' 60.
- 19 Susan Walker, 'More Brutal, More Boring: A Paler Kind of Braveheart,' *Toronto Star* (July 7, 2004): F1; Sharon Waxman, 'At the Movies, at Least, Good Vanquishes Evil,' *The New York Times* (May 10, 2004): E1; Morgenstern, 'Royal Shame,' W1; Liz Braun, 'Fun Knight at Movies: The history may be wonky, but the battle scenes in adventure *King Arthur* are truly smashing,' *The Toronto Sun* (July 7, 2004): 43.
- 20 Peyser, 'Knight of the Living Dead,' 60; Lisa Schwarzbaum, 'Hit or Myth: *King Arthur* tries to set the ancient record straight, but it's not the stuff of legend,' *Entertainment Weekly* 774 (July 16, 2004): 52; Schickel, 'Dark Knights,' 77.
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- 22 Elizabeth Guider, 'Speaking in Tongues: Studios racking up record B.O. at foreign tills,' *Variety* (December 13, 2004): 8; John Lippman, 'Hollywood Report: Bombs Away! Some Big Hollywood Duds Rake Up Profits Overseas, Curing Terminal Woes,' *Wall Street Journal* (November 19, 2004): W12.
- 23 Waxman, 'Summer Box Office,' E6.
- 24 'Knights to Remember: Long live the king,' *The Times* (July 17, 2004): Weekend Review 6.
- 25 For Malory as the most important source for post-medieval Arthurian visual art, see Muriel Whitaker, *The Legends of King Arthur in Art* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990), pp. 306–307. Among the numerous scholars who have pointed to Malory as the medieval author most central to Arthurian film is, most recently, *Hollywood Knights: Arthurian Cinema and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 30.
- 26 'Funny? Don't make me laugh,' *The Times* (July 29, 2004): Screen 2.
- 27 See, for example, John Matthews, 'Why Britain's greatest king was a Roman,' *Daily Mail* (July 3, 2004): Weekend 6; Consultant and screenwriter also talked about their work on the film on the pages of this journal. See Matthews, 'A Knightly Endeavor: The Making of Jerry Bruckheimer's *King Arthur*,' and 'An Interview with David Franzoni,' *ARTHURIANA* 14.3 (Fall 2004): 112–115 and 115–120.
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- 40 According to 'International: Germany, 2004,' Box Office Mojo (No Date): accessed June 2, 2006 <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/intl/germany/2004/>>.
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