Fuqua's *King Arthur*:
More Myth-making in America

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This article sets Fuqua's recent movie *King Arthur* in the context of a century-old desire to blend two "imaginaries": the fifth- and sixth-century Dark Age known to history and archaeology, and the medieval legends of King Arthur and his knights. It is argued that the movie essentially reflects contemporary preoccupations, in particular the desire to see American military initiatives (Vietnam and Iraq) as advancing the cause of freedom, uncontaminated by imperialism, and welcomed by those undergoing liberation. While this goal is pursued with some originality, it appears in the end unconvincing, both as history and as propaganda.

Antoine Fuqua's 2004 *King Arthur* is an undistinguished movie, and few will wish to raise the five-out-of-ten rating accorded to it by Kevin Harty's review (122). Its dialog is flat and frequently pompous, its action scenes predictable. There is something incipiently pedantic about professional medievalists quibbling over the accuracy or otherwise of commercially produced movies,[1] but the strident claims of historical truth made by the producers of this one[2] perhaps license one to say, in reply, that its history is at best dubious, and its geography frankly ludicrous. Nevertheless, it does offer an insight into the Hollywood medieval imaginary; and this is a topic of some importance, which may be thought, by its power and ubiquity, to have had a bearing on public policy decisions even at the very highest level.

The origins of this specifically twenty-first-century take on the Arthurian story go back to a clash between imaginaries evident from the early twentieth century. On the one hand, "King Arthur" is associated above all with the Knights of the Round Table. And, as everyone knows, knights are men on horseback, in armor (preferably shining), and associated with an ethos of gallantry, chivalry, adventure, individual daring. This image, however, is in striking contrast to the image of "the historical Arthur" revealed by archaeology and philology: someone from the post-

or sub-Imperial age of the fifth and sixth centuries, an age of low-level guerilla warfare conducted in squalid and impoverished circumstances, rarely rising to the level of memorable battles, events, or individuals.

Even historians, however, have been very reluctant to give up the knightly image learned in childhood. The decisive intervention was perhaps that of R.G. Collingwood, co-author in 1936 of the authoritative first volume of the Oxford History of England, on *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*. Collingwood's role was to write the larger section on Roman Britain. Almost at the every end of this, however, and rather stepping beyond his assigned part, Collingwood mused that there might have been something, after all, in the Arthurian stories. He declared, in the first place, that "the historicity of the man can hardly be called in question" (321). He argued further that "Artorius" was a "recognized though not very common Roman family name"—carried, though Collingwood does not say this, by the commander of the Second Legion, stationed in Britain in the second century, Lucius Artorius Castus—and then added dogmatically that "His place in the military organization of his age is clearly stated in the *Historia Brittonum*." Collingwood meant, presumably, that the title given him there, not king but *dux bellorum*, is in effect equivalent to the genuine Roman office of *comes Britanniarum*. If, then, Arthur was the commander of a mobile Roman field army, he would have commanded not infantry legions but fifth-century mail-clad cavalry, the Byzantine *equites cataphractarii*. And so the stories of Geoffrey of Monmouth, after all, had a kernel of truth. Collingwood went on to say:

> Though the mist of legend has surrounded the name of Arthur, it is thus possible to descry something which may at least have happened: a country sinking into barbarism, whence Roman ideas had almost vanished; and the emergence of a single man intelligent enough to understand them [sc. up-to-date Roman military ideas], and vigorous enough to put them into practice by gathering round him a group of friends and followers, armed according to the tradition of civilized warfare and proving their invincibility in a dozen campaigns.   324

Collingwood was writing in the late 1930s, and the connection with the fears and hopes of that time are evident: it was indeed at just this moment that Reginald Mitchell was designing the Spitfire and Robert Watson-Watt developing radar, two critically important inventions for civilization, and each depending very much on "a single man." But Collingwood's wish-fulfilling remarks opened the door for a later and less excusable industry of Arthurian historicizing. Prominent examples include Geoffrey Ashe's collection *The Quest for Arthur's Britain* (1968), Leslie Alcock's *Arthur's Britain* (1971), John Morris's *The Age of Arthur* (1973), and their many descendants. The theories in them, as is the way of material often repeated, have further found their way into seemingly authoritative works of reference like *The Arthurian Handbook*, by Norris Lacy and (once more) Geoffrey Ashe.

It is significant, however, that Collingwood's co-worker J. N. L. Myres, whose name appears with his on the spine of *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*, later rejected any connection with his work. Rewriting his section fifty years later as a separate volume, Myres said of the 1936 volume, "The implication [of the cover] that it was a cooperative product of joint authorship, was entirely erroneous" (*English Settlements*, xvii). All he had to say about Arthur/Artorius was that "No figure on the borderline of history and mythology has wasted more of the historian's time" (16). Myres's scornful footnote on John Morris's *Age of Arthur*[3] is outdone by David Dumville, whose irate piece on "Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend" ends with the declaration that Morris and Alcock "have failed even to attempt a twentieth-century view of fifth- and sixth-century history, much less a fifth- or sixth-century view. Their historiography has given us what is in all essentials a mediaeval view of the period" (192): it is the notoriously unreliable Geoffrey of Monmouth all over again.

Just the same, the idea of armored knights in a Dark Age setting was too charming to relinquish, and this is what Fuqua's *King Arthur* is based on. The immediate motivation comes from a book by C. Scott Littleton and Linda A. Malcor, *From Scythia to Camelot*. This builds on a much earlier observation by Kemp Malone ("Artorius") that a Sarmatian cavalry unit had been based in the North of Britain, and commanded by Artorius Castus,[4] to argue that these scale-armored Sarmatians were once again the originals of the Round Table. One does not want to break the butterfly upon the wheel, but the Littleton and Malcor argument is open to several major objections, as follows:

1. The defeated Sarmatians were drafted in the second century. There is no sign that the community was ever reinforced from Sarmatia in such a way as (for three hundred years, as the movie suggests, much less until the twelfth century when the legends were written down) "to maintain its ethnic identity and to resist total assimilation into the indigenous Celtic population" (Littleton and Malcor, 23).

2. The name "Alan," French "Alain," Gaelic "Ailín," is normally taken to be of Celtic derivation. Littleton and Malcor argue that it is derived from Latin *Alanus*, "a member of the Alan tribe," the Alans being a tribe culturally related to the Scythians, and also employed by the Romans elsewhere in Europe. They then take the name, popular in medieval Brittany, to be a sign of descent from Alans settled in that area. But on the basis of names the present writer (Thomas Alan Shippey) is a Sarmatian too; there is no hint in any source of any of the fourth- and fifth-century Alans having anything to do with Arthur, or Artorius Castus, or indeed with Britain. It was five hundred years before Bretons (let alone Alans) re-entered Britain in any numbers.

3. Though Arthur's battles as recorded (much later) by the *Historia Brittonum* have been located in the North, near Hadrian's Wall, they have also been located in the South-East (because of Hengest and Horsa); in the South-West (Tintagel, Cadbury, Camelford, and Glastonbury); and in the East Midlands (for the name of one of the battles does look like Lindsey in Lincolnshire). The battle of Badon Hill, which

is mentioned by the near-contemporary Gildas ("obsessio Badonici montis") has been placed since the twelfth century at Bath, though Kenneth Jackson makes a plausible case for Badbury Rings, not far away ("Site") , and Myres—still refusing even to mention Arthur—an even stronger one for the area of Baydon, near Amesbury in Wiltshire (*English Settlements*, 158–62). All these places are a long way from Hadrian's Wall and the Sarmatian unit's *Bremetennacum veteranorum* in Lancashire.

One may sum up by saying that perhaps the least truthful part of the Fuqua film comes in the first two words of the opening credits, "Historians agree...." On this subject, historians do not agree about anything.

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There is, of course, nothing surprising or even especially reprehensible about facts and arguments being manipulated in the service of a particular imaginary. The question is, what is that imaginary's function in the modern world? One obvious answer is that, as reworked by Fuqua and the scriptwriter David Franzoni, it allows for a narrative based on ethnic identity, or race, a matter of vital concern to most modern audiences. *King Arthur* distinguishes four obvious ethnic groups, Romans, Saxons, Britons, and Sarmatians. Two of these are unequivocally evil, and two as unequivocally virtuous. The evil ones are the Romans and the Saxons, and the Saxons are slightly the worse. They are characteristic movie barbarians, all male, all armed, tending to wear furs and sport strange hairstyles, liable to stab even each other on slight pretext. Their leader, Cerdic—a historical character of the later fifth century, here an elderly person who alone among his men disdains to wear armor in battle—is an extreme racist. He stops one of his men raping a British woman on the grounds that "I will not have our Saxon blood watered down by mixing with them." When the woman thanks him tearfully, he has her killed. The Saxons, like their cousins the English in so many Hollywood movies, have no good points at all.

The Romans, meanwhile, are smoother but otherwise no better. They are represented first by Bishop Germanus, another historical character, this time of the early fifth century, who here appears not to lead the Britons as the real Germanus is said to have done, but to send the Sarmatians on a final suicide mission north of the wall. The mission is to rescue and evacuate a Roman Senator, Marius, from his estate, and to bring back also his son Alecto, said to be the Pope's favorite godson. This is an aspect of the movie's story which appears completely indefensible, historically and geographically. What a Roman Senator could be doing, what profit there could be for him in being in such a totally exposed position, is never explained, nor is the obvious question of what the Saxons are doing, invading from entirely the wrong direction after what must have been a long, dangerous, and unnecessary open-sea crossing. Marius's estate is said to be three days' march north of the Wall (in an area full of unsubdued natives, or so we were told earlier in the movie), and

so is presumably somewhere near Edinburgh, or Glasgow. But the route of escape is said to be through the mountains to the east of the estate, which does not fit this geography at all. Whatever its location, Marius's estate seems to be modeled for the movie-makers on all the worst features of an eighteenth- or nineteenth- century Mississippi or Alabama plantation, with a native population reduced to servitude, elders whipped to death for asking for food for their people, and dungeons guarded by bullying soldiers and self-righteous priests. There is admittedly some slight suggestion that the Romans were, once upon a time, more admirable, with a memory of a *mission civilatrice*, and an army which was once all-conquering, for Arthur has to be persuaded out of this belief; but just as all Saxons in the movie are savage and racist, all contemporary Romans are oppressive and cowardly.

On the side of virtue are the Britons, also known as "Woads." They function to begin with as victims, led by Merlin, still bravely resisting Roman power, but essentially needing to be rescued. Guinevere is the main victim-turned-heroine. She is released from one of Marius's cells, and becomes another movie stereotype, the warrior-princess. Her status to begin with is uncertain, but evidently high. Though she comes from north of the wall, where the Woads are said to be still unconquered (though incapable of resisting Marius and his inept guardsmen), she seems to have authority south of it as well, and turns out to be Merlin's daughter. Like Cerdic, she disdains armor, going into battle in what looks like leather underwear.

Finally, and the new element in this imaginary, we have the Sarmatians, six of them, all given names traditionally belonging to knights of the Round Table: Lancelot, Bors, Tristram, Galahad, Gawain, and Dagonet. It is interesting that no-one actually says the word "slave"—if one accepts the "Sarmatian = GI" identification suggested below, it would be an embarrassment—but the Sarmatians are hereditary slave-soldiers, compelled to leave their homes on the steppe and fight for Rome in the far West. The six are all that survive of some larger number, and all are due for discharge. The price of their discharge papers, however, is Germanus's suicide mission. So they have spent their time fighting the Woads for the Romans, but now have to fight the Saxons, and in the end ally with and liberate the Woads— thus, in a way, liberating themselves from the Romans too. As Guinevere is victim-turned-heroine, they are slaves who find freedom.

The remaining and most conflicted character is Arthur. His father was Roman, his mother was a Woad, and in some unexplained way he is a hereditary commander of the Sarmatians. Where do his loyalties lie? In brief, he abandons Rome; marries Guinevere; and persuades the three surviving Sarmatians to give up thoughts of return to the steppe and, like him, take on a new ethnic identity, never actually defined but presumably British. The last scene of the movie, as released, is labeled "Unity."

Ethnic identity is not, however, the main theme of the movie. This is indicated so often that one is put in mind of impatient people standing by an elevator and repeatedly pushing the same button in the hope that this time, surely, they will get the desired response. The theme is "freedom." A selection of moments where this is

stated, or appealed to, in ways seemingly meant to be stressed or decisive, runs as follows (scene numbers and titles are given from the "Director's Cut" DVD):

1. In scene 1, "Opening Credits," Galahad says they are heading towards "Our freedom, Bors." Bors, looking forward to his discharge, replies "I can almost taste it!"

2. In scene 2, "Hadrian's Wall," Bors offers a toast: "To freedom!"

3. In the same scene Arthur says, with misguided optimism—and rather strangely, considering the more familiar Roman self-image—that in Rome, "The greatest minds of all mankind have come together in one sacred place, to help make mankind free."

4. In scene 3, "Final Order," Bors says, here contradicting his more usual sense of military bondage, "I am a free man. I will choose my own fate."

5. In scene 5, "Marius' Estate," Arthur says to Marius's rescued serfs, "All of you were free from your first breath."

6. In scene 6, "Rain and Snow," Lancelot reminisces about home on the steppe, which with its "oceans of grass" and "sky bigger than you can imagine" sounds very much like home on the range. Guinevere replies, "Some people would call that freedom. That's what we fought for. Our land. Our people. The right to choose our own destiny."

7. In the same scene she says to Arthur, "It's a natural state of any man to want to live free, in their own country."

8. In scene 7, "Excalibur," Arthur replies angrily to Guinevere (who has used the word "destiny"), "There is no destiny. There is only free will."

9. In scene 8, "Saxon Confrontation," Arthur says to Marius's son Alecto, about his father's beliefs: "What, that some men are born to be slaves? No that isn't true."

Pelagius teaches that "all men are free, equal, and that each of us has the right to choose his own destiny." Alecto tells him Pelagius has been executed.

10. In scene 9, "Freedom," Germanus tells the Sarmatians, twice, "You are free now. You can go." Bors, angry at the death of Dagonet, looks at his discharge papers and says, "This doesn't make [Dag] a free man. He's already a free man. He's dead."

11. In the same scene Guinevere says to Arthur that Britain, "[t]his place, this land, your home, is the last outpost of freedom."

12. In scene 10, "Battle for the Wall," Lancelot asks Arthur, "What was it all for, if not the reward of freedom?" and Arthur replies, "Seize the freedom you have earned."

13. In scene 11, "Badon Hill," Tristram releases his hawk with the words, "You're free."

14. However, in the same scene the Sarmatians, discharged from duty and heading south, turn back to help Arthur who has stayed, and do so voluntarily. Arthur says, in a long speech evidently meant to be pivotal: "Knights, the gift of freedom is yours by right. But the home we seek lies not in some distant land. It's in us and in our actions on this day. If this be our destiny, then so be it. But let history remember that as free men we chose to make it so."

15. After the battle of Badon Hill, in scene 13, "A Roman Knight," Lancelot in voice-over, for he has been killed in the battle, says that "on that day at Badon Hill all who fought put our lives in service of a greater cause [sc., than Rome]. Freedom."

There is a certain semantic subtlety in these many repetitions, for in some of the early uses, in the first two-thirds of the movie, "freedom" means something clearly limited—for the Sarmatians, freedom from military service, freedom to return home. However, in items three through nine above, and much more strongly in the last two speeches, the word carries a more general, more elevated, and more political sense: freedom to make choices, for the Woads freedom from foreign domination, freedom as the natural state of humanity. The critical moment is the turn-about of the Sarmatians in scene 11: before then fighting under compulsion, for the Empire against an enemy selected by their Roman masters, against Woads as well as Saxons; but now fighting willingly, against an enemy they see as theirs. Moreover, in the background, and not very well integrated into the story as we have it, is a clash between the theology of Pelagius, another historical character, this time from late fourth-century Britain (fl. 380–418), which stresses free will as against—we are told—official Roman Church doctrine, which stresses destiny, fate, servitude, knowing one's place in life.

No-one in the modern world, of course, is against freedom. This makes one wonder what purpose is being served by the continual stress on it. Is it felt to be threatened? If so, who by? For which real enemy are the Romans, and the Saxons, standing in? What is the sore spot in the modern psyche which the movie wants to massage?

One feasible if in 2004 rather unexpected answer is that *King Arthur* is yet one more reflex of the generation-old trauma over Vietnam. The Britain of the movie is rather like Vietnam. The enemy comes from the north; our side is on the south; but the south is run by a corrupt regime; and it is in any case about to be abandoned by a powerful empire which has decided to cut its losses. These evident parallels are confirmed by several statements in John Matthews's "Interview" with the scriptwriter David Franzoni, to be found in the "Round Table" discussion in *Arthuriana*. There Franzoni says that what struck him, working in Los Angeles, was the parallel he sees between the ancestors of Arthur's (Sarmatian) knights and modern Californian Hell's Angels. After that, he says, the Arthurian story "became for me the American GI experience—strangers in a strange land, killing to stay alive and hating doing it" (116).[5] As for Arthur, he is like an officer starting off with ideals, "believing in Rome, believing you're right, but having that belief stripped away... and serving with a bunch of guys who completely hate what they're doing, who are surrounded by people who hate them, and who are longing to go home" (116). Later he says, "In my mind I think of Ho Chi Min [sic] as a model for Merlin" (117).

If one follows this parallel through, then in *King Arthur* what happens, metaphorically, is that the surly and disillusioned American GIs (the Sarmatians), in Vietnam (Britain), free themselves from the imperial government that has turned its back on them (Rome, or Washington), make common cause with their former enemies (the Woads, the Vietcong), and defeat their real enemies. In the movie these are of course Cerdic and his Saxons, but it is not clear who the real-life parallel to them might be: the North Vietnamese regular army? This would involve believing, as some do, that the North Vietnamese always intended to subjugate

all of the South, their Vietcong allies included. Or are we to think of the Chinese, the Russians, the alien forces thought by some to be behind all Liberation Fronts? Whatever the imaginary enemy, the important point is that the struggle ends, for the Sarmatians/GIs, not in embarrassing defeat but in resounding and final victory. So essential is this part of the plot line that it has quite overwhelmed any faintest memory of historical accuracy. In the tie-in novel *King Arthur* written by Frank Thompson and based on Franzoni's script, the "Afterword" declares that "The victory of Arthur at Badon Hill was so complete and so devastating that the Saxon army retreated forever from Britain."[6] In reality, the English, or Anglo-Saxons, or Saxons as they continue to be called in all the modern Celtic languages, not only came back but imposed their language and their rule on the whole island of Britain, which is why this paper is in English.[7] Furthermore, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II could, if she so wished, trace her ancestry back to Cerdic, Fuqua and Franzoni's arch-villain: but not to Arthur and Guinevere, though several kings of England would have found the connection useful. But Hollywood does not deal well with failure, whether in Dark Age Britain or 1970s Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City). That is why it has to be negotiated.

There are several filmic ways of negotiating the unacceptable images of America-as-oppressor and America-as-loser, and this essay takes its sub-title from one analysis of them, H. Bruce Franklin's controversial book *MIA or Mythmaking in America*. In this, Professor Franklin (incidentally, himself no "peacenik" but a veteran of the US Air Force, former navigator of a B-52 strategic bomber) charts the rise and decline of the "Missing In Action" movement; argues that it was at different times welcome and inconvenient to the US government, and so at different times fomented and discouraged; and rather sadly concludes that there is no evidence that the North Vietnamese government ever did detain prisoners in secret, because "missing in action" in modern warfare means "dead."

What is especially relevant to *King Arthur*, though, is Franklin's demonstration of the way that famous movies like *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Missing in Action* (1984), *Uncommon Valor* (1985), and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), successfully inverted some of the most disconcerting images of the real Vietnam war (see *MIA*, 127–66, especially 133–36, 155). The South Vietnamese chief of secret police shooting a Vietcong prisoner in the head, a sequence seen on TV by tens of millions of Americans, becomes the American prisoner forced to play Russian roulette; the "tiger cages" of the South Vietnamese regime in Saigon become the half-submerged cages in which Americans are kept; a grenade is thrown into a bunker full of women and children not by Lt. Calley's men, as shown in *Life*'s pictures of the My Lai massacre, but by the inhuman North Vietnamese. Meanwhile the real enemy, for Rambo, is not the Communists but his own superiors who held him back from victory, who fought their bureaucratic war through the computers which he exultantly smashes in the final scenes of *Rambo II*. The true hero similarly becomes, not the serviceman obeying orders in which he has no confidence, but the mercenary who (paradoxically) fights voluntarily for his own selected cause—

though this is against the same enemies as those of the serviceman.[8] Such movies assuage the sense of guilt, the sense of defeat, of an anxious audience. They reassert betrayed or challenged values.

King Arthur can be seen likewise as a "reassurance movie," though one could actually go further. It is a critical and original moment in Mary Renault's distinguished historical novel *The Mask of Apollo* (1966) when the narrator, an actor who has found himself caught up in Plato's failed attempt to found an ideal philosophers' republic in post-Dionysus Syracuse, reflects sadly that not only tyrants have sycophants. He means that democracies (like Athens) have them too: people who tell the citizenry that their policies are just, and admirable, and admired, just like the yes-men who surround dictators. In other words, democracies can be tyrannical as well, and need as much correction as despots and oligarchs. In this view, *King Arthur* could be seen as a "sycophantic movie." It tells its audience that their values are universal, shows them challenged only to be triumphantly reasserted, and ends up with all the virtuous characters, Woads, Sarmatians, Merlin, Guinevere and Arthur, aligned on the same side. If the Sarmatians did wrong in suppressing the Woads, they have now made it good. Guilt is expelled with the Roman scapegoats, and the exterminated-for-ever Saxons, who can never come back.

The next question must be, why should this seem to be necessary in 2004, a generation after the fall of Saigon? There may be a connection here with another less-than-markedly successful Arthurian movie, Jerry Zucker's *First Knight* (1995). The links between its view of the Arthurian story and contemporary 1990s reality were rather apparent. At its political core was the protective annexation, by Arthur's Camelot, of Guenevere's Lyonesse, to save it and her from invasion by the forces of Malagant. This could hardly help recalling the first Gulf War, and the American-led liberation of Kuwait from the forces of Saddam Hussein. Why should Arthur/Bush Senior have a right of invasion and not Malagant/Saddam? The answer, both in the movie and in reality, was obvious: the Arthur/Guenevere relationship was an alliance, indeed a marriage, while the Malagant/Guenevere relationship would have been abduction leading to rape. Just the same the movie contained a critical scene, picked out in a study by Nick Haydock ("Arthurian Melodrama," 23), in which Malagant is allowed to make a powerful general and relativist point to Arthur and to his knights in council at the Round Table itself, of which Malagant was once a member. The exchange goes as follows:

> **Arthur:** You know the law we live by. And where is it written that beyond Camelot live lesser people—too weak to defend themselves—let them die?
> **Malagant:** Other people live by other laws, Arthur. Or is the law of Camelot to rule the entire world?
> **Arthur:** There are laws that enslave men and laws that set them free. Either what we hold to be right and good and true, is right and good and true for all mankind, under God, or we're just another robber tribe.

It is not clear that Arthur, even if represented by Sean Connery, wins this exchange. After all, "what we hold" (no matter who "we" may be) is not necessarily held by "all mankind," indeed it quite obviously often isn't; and bringing in "under God"—with its deliberate suggestion of the American Pledge of Allegiance—does not settle the matter. What if it was "under Allah"? Writing in the immediate aftermath of the World Trade Center atrocity, Haydock had to choose his words carefully, as one still does, but "we are in the right because we know we are" sounds less and less like a compelling argument.

Perhaps at the core of the anxiety which both Arthurian movies are addressing is an uncertainty over one of the most popular of Hollywood meta-narratives, the "liberation narrative." In this—recent examples include *Braveheart* and *The Patriot*—brutal occupation forces are bravely and triumphantly expelled, after which the occupied nations head into a bright future of freedom and equality, just as in *King Arthur*. Recent experience, though—and it should have been apparent from historical experience as well—indicates that wars of liberation are usually at the same time civil wars; and one engages in a civil war at the risk of discovering that one's chosen side is not superior, morally, to its opponents. Furthermore, if one gives a people the gift of freedom, one then has no right to say what they will do with it, or the whole point of the exercise is lost. But they may freely and voluntarily choose, and indeed vote for, not American democracy but Islamist theocracy, or possibly Communism. These are the haunting thoughts, no doubt in most minds unformed, unfocused, or rejected, which the "freedom narrative" of *King Arthur*, with its conflicted but eventually realigned heroes, perhaps sets itself to exorcise.

This may account for the very buffet-style approach to the Arthurian legend as a whole, as also some of the odder features of the plot already noted. To take the latter first, the extremely implausible "suicide mission" beyond the Wall on which the Sarmatians are sent is both a Vietnam stereotype (*Apocalypse Now*, 1979, as well as several of the movies already mentioned), and also a feature of Fuqua's 2003 film *Tears of the Sun*, in which Bruce Willis plays a Special Ops commander protecting African refugees from other Africans in a contemporary setting.[9] Lancelot's speech about his home, the Big Sky Country, is surely meant to recall Montana; and Arthur's oddly inapposite remark about the Roman ideal being to make people free becomes much more apposite if related to the American self-image rather than the Roman.[10] As Caroline Jewers says in "Mission Historical," a propos of Franzoni's statements in the interview with Matthews, "Every reference makes the knights the product of twenty-first century American attitudes." Near the start of his essay "Shooting the Messenger" in this volume, Nick Haydock argues that movie technology itself makes for an essentially "presentist" art-form. But there is more than one present in the modern world, more than one "conception of national or personal identity," and of course more than one "vision of history and legend that [will] work in the present." My criticism here is emphatically not that Fuqua fails to portray the "real" or the "historical" King Arthur, about which we know little enough to allow enormous

play for imagination, but that his "metafiction" is essentially self-absorbed, self-flattering: metafictions do not have to be that, no matter how "presentist" they are.

Returning to retentions and excisions of the traditional story: we are given a Round Table scene and a Sword in the Stone scene, this latter, as happened in *First Knight*, providing a motivation for one of the leading characters—Arthur this time, not Lancelot—in terms of ancient atrocity and trauma. Guinevere is present, and a selection of leading knights. But there is no Mordred-figure to take the place of *First Knight*'s Malagant, and major features of the traditional story have been deleted, such as the adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere and the resultant breakup of the Round Table. In *First Knight* this was watered down to a passionate kiss, leading to a trial of the lovers, but the outcome of it was dodged: Arthur died conveniently in battle, and a happy ending was set up for Lancelot and Guinevere. In *King Arthur* we see Lancelot peering through the dark night at a near-naked Guinevere, after which they have a conversation full of smoldering glances, but in the end it is Lancelot who dies, and so once again the script eliminates any possibility of the traditional love-triangle. Further, the reflex of defeat in the "legendary Arthur" is that he disappears, goes beyond the sea, goes to Avalon, perhaps to come again, which is why he is "The Once and Future King." John Boorman's 1981 *Excalibur* kept the Avalon motif, but this was rationalized in *First Knight* to the dead Arthur being pushed out in a boat to be set on fire by fire-arrows. In *King Arthur* we still have the final fire-arrows, but Arthur is well and happy—and also, seemingly, now the king, and so much for equality for all and the ideal of the Round Table: Bors is seen dropping uncertainly on to one knee, along with everyone else. The movie ends—in the version as released—with joy and marriage for some, immortal glory for others, freedom and unity for all, and an image of great horses running across the screen, representing the unchecked spirit of chivalry. Arthurian movie endings, in short, just get happier and happier.

It is, however, only fair to say that this does not seem to be Fuqua's responsibility. The "Director's Cut" version of *King Arthur*, released on Disney DVD, gives a quite different "Alternate Ending," which appears to have been the one that Fuqua preferred. In this there was no Arthur-and-Guinevere wedding scene. Instead the scene "A Roman Knight" would have continued with a string of close-ups of the characters on the battlefield, followed by the scene of the cremations. In this Arthur and Guinevere hold hands, in a kind of vestigial or symbolic wedding, but the "unity" theme is replaced by another reprise of the "freedom" theme, with Bors saying defiantly, as he looks at the cremations, "They chose their own fate—as did we all. As did we all." The scene continues with the British child rescued, along with Guinevere, from Marius struggling to pull a sword out of the ground, like the child-Arthur in scene 7, and being reassured by Arthur. In his DVD audio commentary at this point Fuqua says that this means "one day you'll be strong. There's a King Arthur in all of us." I comment on other remarks of this kind below, but meanwhile would agree with Fuqua that it probably would have been more interesting "if we would have stuck to a darker ending." The change seems to have been the result

of audience pressure. Trial showings, says Fuqua, led them to think that audiences wanted a happier ending.

Again in fairness, one should also note that *King Arthur* as released was not the version Fuqua intended to shoot. In his DVD audio commentary, Fuqua remarks (near the end of scene 8, the "battle on the ice" sequence, continuing on into the start of scene 9) that he owes a great debt to the movie editor, Conrad Buff. Apparently, as the movie was being shot, a decision was made at high level to change it from an R-rating to a PG-13 rating. This immediately meant, says Fuqua, change of everything including overall vision. Fuqua confesses, rather movingly: "My movie which I shot was being chipped away.... Now I'm sitting in a room being enthusiastic about something I don't want to do." Some days "I would come in and I'd just want to slit my throat, I was so depressed." It was Buff's professionalism, born of long experience of disappointments and compromises in the film world, that carried them through.

One may nevertheless suspect that "Fuqua A," so to speak, would not have been very different from "Fuqua B" in terms of theme and motivation, though it would have been bloodier,[11] and have ended with freedom and glory rather than unity and regeneration. It is also curious that the decision as regards the ending may have been a poor one, even commercially. The trial showings of *King Arthur* demonstrate that movie-makers try above all to give their audiences what (they think) they want, but market researchers are probably no more reliable as guides than directors' gut feelings. All three big costume epics of 2004, *Troy*, *Alexander*, and *King Arthur* proved box-office flops, despite all of them trying in their different ways to play up to the assumed wishes and prejudices of their target audience.[12] By contrast, Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movies, with their very downbeat ending and acceptance of several scenes of grief, have been immensely successful. It is probable that the movie-going audience has more tolerance of emotional range than directors and their controllers have feared; and that is fortunate. For, while there may be nothing wrong in principle with reconstructed happy endings, one can say one thing for sure about an audience brought up on an invariant diet of them, and of metanarratives like the Hollywood "liberation narrative": in a real world growing ever more complex and dangerous, such an audience will be above all psychologically hopelessly ill-prepared for danger, for even temporary setbacks, and for hard moral choices. Hollywood heroism is cheap. The bad guys' bullets and arrows regularly miss. The good guys always win. But in the real world, alas, that is not the way things will go, not the way things have gone—not the way things are going.

This last phrase brings up another and equally severe danger which one can detect in *King Arthur*, and that is its truly astonishing moral naiveté. This shows itself in what one might call the "cause-and-purpose" motif which runs along with the "freedom" motif. Its first appearance is in scene 9, "Freedom," when Guinevere is trying to console Arthur for what he sees as a wasted career, oppressing people he should have saved. When she reminds him of his great deeds, he replies, "Deeds in themselves are meaningless unless they're for some higher purpose." In the next

scene, "Battle for the Wall," by now reassured that he is on the side of the angels, Arthur tells Cerdic, "I fight for a cause beyond your or Rome's understanding." In scene 13, "A Roman Knight," as I have already mentioned, the dead Lancelot says that "on that day at Badon Hill all who fought put our lives in service of a greater cause." And at the end of the movie, in scene 14, "Unity" (the re-arranged ending), Arthur says "let every man, woman, child, bear witness that from this day all Britons will be united in one common cause."

No-one is against freedom, in theory, but it is quite possible to be against greater causes and higher purposes. The trouble is that too many people have them. Terrorists have them: Osama bin-Laden would surely agree with Arthur's reply to Guinevere. Imperialists had them: what Lancelot says about Badon Hill would probably have been said about Omdurman, Assaye, or the assault on Ticonderoga. And causes beyond other people's understanding are as likely, in the real world, to justify committing people to dungeons and torture as to motivate, as the movie would have it, releasing people from dungeons and torture. The obvious question to ask about higher purposes, as in the *First Knight* scene between Arthur and Malagant cited above, is "who decides what's higher? Whose law shall rule?" *King Arthur*, like most Hollywood movies, deals with this by loading the balances in the plot, so that good and evil are quite unmistakable. But this could be done either way. And if one ignores the loading of Marius and Germanus and Cerdic and Cynric, in the end what *King Arthur* is proposing is a world in which good and evil are determined by ethnic identity or, one might as well say, by race; in which what is vital is the presence of a Great Leader.[13] The message of its final scene, "Unity," could well be summed up by the slogan *ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Führer*. Older Europeans, and Americans, have encountered this set of beliefs before; but the word they associate with them is not "freedom."

Accusing people of being proto-Fascists is by now such a familiar rhetorical trope as to carry little conviction, and in fact I do not mean to charge Fuqua, or Bruckheimer, or Franzoni, with anything like serious Nazi sympathies: I am sure the idea would horrify them as much as anyone. They can be charged, though, with not thinking things through, with not scrutinizing their own Hollywood ideology, preferring instead to keep pushing the same worn old verbal buttons—as Fuqua reportedly did, outside the movie, in an interview for *20/20*. Alan Lupack reports him as saying there, "Anybody could become King Arthur. That's what's great about a great hero ... that he's in you and if it's a righteous cause and you fight, then your name should ring on forever" (25). This combines the totally inclusive "all heroes are guys / all guys are heroes" thesis with the unconsciously exclusive "righteous causes are causes I deem righteous" thesis.

A very proper response to this kind of thoughtlessness is simply to laugh at it. Caroline Jewers begins her article by saying that *King Arthur* is a move which cries out for irreverent sub-titles: *King Arthur, or 101 Sarmatians*; *King Arthur, or Bend it like Guinevere*. Thinking of the final incongruous white-wedding scene, and remembering Eliza Doolittle, I would add, *King Arthur, or Woadn't it be Luverly*.

There are occasional genial elements in the acting too, from its mostly British cast. With his Essex accent, shaven skull, and careless philoprogenitiveness, Bors (Ray Winstone) presents the positive side of football hooliganism; suitably to her part, Guinevere (Keira Knightley) not only has a perfect English-rose complexion, but also a charmingly upper-class accent—she gets more vowels into the word "home" than the conventional spelling-system can well accommodate. One might say, as Matthews does, "we were making an entertainment rather than a documentary" ("Knightly Endeavor," 114–15).

Movies, however, not only reflect the real political world, they may also affect it. Franzoni says, "I've been asked over and over if the movie is about Bagdad [sic]," and goes on, "The obvious answer is that it's not, because I wrote it before that war" (Matthews, "Interview," 116). It may have something to do with Baghdad just the same. H. Bruce Franklin has pointed out how powerfully the real world of South-East Asia and the celluloid world of Hollywood were connected in the 1980s. William Shatner ("Captain Kirk") and Clint Eastwood ("Dirty Harry") put up money for an attempt to rescue the non-existent MIA American prisoners. The attempt was a grotesque failure, but the movies were made anyway, as *Uncommon Valor* (1983), *Missing in Action* (1984), and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), in which the rescue attempts were naturally a success (Franklin, *MIA*, 137–42). What effect this had on President Reagan we cannot be sure, but he referred to Rambo as a role-model in connection with the release of US hostages in Beirut in 1985 (151), and Franklin notes that Reagan "had actually been a POW of Asian Communists during the Korean War—[if only] as the star of the 1954 movie *Prisoner of War*" (138).

One can be even less sure how much effect Hollywood has, or has had, on the Bush administration, but the errors made in Baghdad look very much like the result of a leadership which has absorbed the Hollywood "liberation narrative." The default setting of humanity is to be a democratic American (compare Guinevere's "It's a natural state for any man to want to live free, in their own country," or the *First Knight* King Arthur formulation quoted above). If, then, the wicked oppressors—Romans, redcoats, Saddam Hussein—are removed, a population will revert to its "natural state," and the only problem will be sweeping up the rose petals from the victory parade. There is no need to plan for an Iraqi civil war, or an ongoing insurgency problem, for in Hollywood narratives such things do not arise.[14] They are messy, undramatic, irresolvable, and liable to end in failure, like everything we know about Dark Age Britain and the hypothetically historical "King Arthur." Hollywood, in short, may do more harm than it knows. Too many Hollywood rewritings of history are not only silly, they are dangerously silly.

Notes

1 For a good statement of this case, see Keith Kelly (2004). I refrain, accordingly, from any detailed comment on the views expressed by cast and producers in the "Round Table Discussion" to be found as one of the "Special Features" of the Disney "Director's Cut" DVD. Keira Knightley's thoughts on matriarchal "Picts and Celts," Jerry Bruckheimer's on Arthurian romances as told by French "jesters" in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries—these are not their own opinions, but garbled memories of something they have been told.

2 See John Matthews, "A Knightly Endeavor." Matthews claims that the filmmakers' intention was to make "the first really accurate portrayal of Arthur and his men. Here was no light-hearted, entertainment–first–historical–accuracy–afterwards approach" (113). Matthews was retained as historical adviser to the film, and is the author of *King Arthur: Dark Age Warrior and Mythic Hero* (2004).

3 Morris's title, *Age of Arthur*, according to Myres, "shows a total disregard of the valid historical evidence" (*English Settlements*, 16n).

4 It should be noted that Malone made other attempts to root legend in history. His *Literary History of Hamlet* caused deep astonishment to the Shakespeare critics to whom it was sent for review, in that Malone never reached Shakespeare's play at all: his argument was that the figure of "Hamlet" was based on a character in *Beowulf*, the Swedish king Onela, via hypothetical Old Norse forms such as **Ali hinn óði*, "Mad Ali."

5 Franzoni repeats this, with slightly different wording, in the "Round Table Discussion" between cast members and producers on the DVD.

6 I owe this reference to Caroline Jewers, who cites it in "Mission Historical." I am much indebted to Dr Jewers for showing me her typescript of this article in advance of publication and allowing me to quote from it.

7 Just to make the historical point absolutely clear: Thompson's error here is on a par with believing that the European colonists of America were thrust back into the sea in the early seventeenth century, and that the modern USA is populated entirely by Native Americans–which, as P. G. Wodehouse's Jeeves would say, we know not to be the case.

8 There is a parallel theme in the phenomenon of "military science fiction," for which see my own article, "Starship Troopers."

9 The latter point made also by Harty in his review (122).

10 In the *Aeneid* 6.853, Virgil famously declares that it is the destiny and duty of Rome "parcere subiectis et debellare superbos," "to spare the defeated and put down the proud with war." This contains an ideal of mercy, and arguably of good government, if one takes the *superbi* to mean political tyrants, but it has nothing to say about freedom.

11 Fuqua remarks on this at some length in his DVD "audio commentary" on the "battle on the ice" sequence, several times rather regretfully using the adjective "vicious."

12 Daniel Mendelsohn astutely remarks of *Troy* that its makers have "a single unifying notion: that the Trojan War was a war like any other" ("A Little Illiad," 46). Compare Franzoni's final words on Arthur, in Matthews, "Interview" (120): "he's just a guy. That's what I wanted to say in this movie." Mendelsohn's 2005 review of *Alexander* is also astute on film-makers' motivations. He too contrasts historical movies with the historical novels of Mary Renault, to the advantage of the latter, as I do above. Neither of us thinks this is an inevitable result of a preferred medium.

13 Merlin says to Arthur in scene 7 (DVD), "Excalibur," "My men are strong, but they have need of a true leader."

14 Saddam Hussein is reported to have said, in 1990, "The Americans are still influenced by Rambo movies, but this is not a Rambo movie" (Franklin, *MIA*, 151). Even evil despots may see some things clearly.

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