The Medieval Hero on Screen

Representations from Beowulf to Buffy

Edited by MARTHA W. DRIVER
and SID RAY

with a foreword by
Jonathan Rosenbaum

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What's Accuracy Got to Do with It?

Historicity and Authenticity in Medieval Film

Martha W. Driver

"Le cinéma n'est pas un spectacle, c'est une écriture."[1]

Writing about historical film in his 1987 essay on Abel Gance's *Napoleon*, Marc Ferro asks the compelling question: "Where does the truth lie in all this history?"[1] Ferro provides this provocative answer:

> With distance, one version of history replaces another but the work of art remains. And so, with the passage of time, our memory winds up by not distinguishing between, on the one hand, the imaginative memory of Eisenstein or Gance, and on the other, history such as it really happened, even though historians seek to make us understand and artists seek to make us participate.[2]

As Ferro suggests and we know from our own experience, film provides immediacy and simultaneously appeals to the imagination, engaging the viewer in the past and involving him emotionally and imaginatively in the action on screen. Film is a central part of our entertainment culture that involves a range of people, often including our students, in formal and informal dialogues about moral and social issues. With film in particular, one is generally conscious (if one is watching consciously) of intentional and unintentional anachronism, and the imposing of contemporary social or political values on the past. This might disturb the teacher of history or literature who hopes for more realistic or truer representation, for documentary rather than fantasy. Openness to a variety of representations, however, whether of medieval works of art or of moments in medieval history or of stories popular in the Middle Ages, can freshen our historical perspectives, awakening us as well to the

cultural attitudes and agendas underpinning those interpretations. In other words, movies are multivalenced, telling us simultaneously about the distant past and about more recent events and social attitudes.

To characterize the fluid content of medieval texts, the critic Paul Zumthor uses the term "mouvance." The term means alive, "moving," unfixed. Zumthor has described medieval literature as "a sequence of productions."[3] Like the retellings of the Robin Hood legend or the King Arthur stories on film, medieval texts are multivalenced and often open-ended, the same stories told and retold across time, in many cultures and in many languages. Medieval literature, chronicles, and art can further be said, again like film, to be collaboratively produced. Medieval authors like Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chaucer, and Giovanni Boccaccio draw on rich sources of folktale and earlier narrative to tell their stories. The expertise revealed in the telling of old tales, technical acumen, and the display of rhetorical skill were more valued in medieval culture than originality.

The tendency to recast an older story in light of current tastes or to address contemporary issues under the guise of historical representation is not, in fact, new. When examining the illuminated pages of a medieval Book of Hours, for example, de luxe manuscripts produced for wealthy patrons, we notice both realistic details and idealized elements. Buildings and implements, for instance, are often realistically rendered while in the farming scenes that illustrate the calendar portions of these texts, the costumes of the peasants are brightly colored, the women's aprons crisply white and clean. Their hands and faces, no matter the task at hand, whether slaughtering or grape-picking, appear freshly washed. Such pictures were, of course, painted for the pleasure of the books' aristocratic owners. The images are charming and sanitized, similar to the scrubbed version of historical films produced in Hollywood in the 1940s and 1950s. Conventions of representation, readily recognizable iconography, and reaffirmations of social stereotypes were apparently as popular in the calendar pages of Books of Hours as they are later on film, types of visual shorthand promoting idealized scenes of daily life.

Compare, for example, the sweeping (and immaculate) stage sets of Sir Laurence Olivier's 1944 film of *Henry V* with the muddy outdoor footage of Kenneth Branagh's 1989 version. Olivier's film gives an idealized heroic account of the Battle of Agincourt, while Branagh's vision is more gruesome, violent, and to us, realistic, reflecting another stereotype that the Middle Ages were "dark, dirty, violent … unstable or threatening."[4] Just as our perceptions of realism, of history, in medieval art are shaped by visual conventions, so too with films. As film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum commented to me some years ago, "It doesn't matter if the historical details of the film are authentic. They just have to look authentic to the audience."[5] Authenticity is a convention of costume drama,

part of the visual language in the re-creation of history on screen, and a starting point for the recovery of the true historical elements underlying the fiction, if one wishes to explore them. Discussing film, the director Robert Bresson rather enigmatically suggested that "Le cinéma n'est pas un spectacle, c'est une écriture" (Cinema is not a spectacle, it is a document). His *Lancelot du Lac* (1974) creates a powerful modern version of the Arthur story, the timely emphasis on warfare and bloodshed presenting "war as anonymous and indifferent slaughter, with faceless phantoms in the darkness battling and perishing beneath heavy armor that instantly turns into scrap metal as soon as the bodies become mute."[6] As Bresson suggests, film can stand as a kind of history alongside the writing of professional historians, giving us glimpses into the past, which is otherwise only available through texts, documents, and artifacts. Film provides an imaginative immediacy and reality, a luminous world we physically enter by watching and listening. Film, in fact, is an important scholarly medium, revealing not only historical aspects of the Middle Ages but perceptions of the Middle Ages in various times and places, and also in popular culture, a theme that will reappear in some form in all of the essays in this volume.

David John Williams has further pointed out, "The cinematic Middle Ages represents the way many people really think of that part of their history,"[7] an idea that may be reassuring to some though alarming to others. The greatest films with medieval themes may draw effectively from the historical record, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1982), for example, or from a classic work of literature as is the case with Eric Rohmer's *Perceval le Gallois* (1978).[8] The two essays in this opening section discuss the ways in which a range of medieval story elements have found their way into twentieth-century film. In an important and persuasive essay, "Heroism and Alienation through Language in *The Lord of the Rings*," David Salo, linguistic advisor to the recent *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy directed by Peter Jackson, looks at the careful reconstruction of J.R.R. Tolkien's medieval fantasy world, even to the making and speaking of Tolkien's several invented languages as markers of gender, race, and class. William F. Woods further examines questions of authenticity and history in his essay "Authenticating Realism in Medieval Film," drawing his examples from a range of films including *The Seventh Seal* (1957), *Excalibur* (1981), *The Return of Martin Guerre*, *The Name of the Rose* (1986), *Braveheart* (1995), and *The Advocate* (*L'Heure de Cochon*, 1994). Both essays demonstrate that appearances of authenticity draw audiences into film and that film itself is interpretative, just as scholarship, history, and primary sources themselves are interpretative.

Notes

1. Robert Bresson, quoted by Jonathan Rosenbaum, "The Battle of Armor, the Softness of Flesh: Bresson's *Lancelot du Lac,*" *Movies as Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 202.

2. Marc Ferro, *Cinema and History,* tr. Naomi Green (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), p. 73.

3. Paul Zumthor, *Essai de Poétique médiévale* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972), pp. 74–81.

4. David John Williams, "Medieval Movies," *Yearbook of English Studies* 20 (1990): 10. For more on the Olivier version, made during World War II and "dedicated to the commando and airborne troops of Great Britain," see Sue Harper, *Picturing the Past: The Rise and Fall of British Costume Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), p. 86ff.

5. Conversation with Jonathan Rosenbaum, author, film critic and reviewer for the *Chicago Reader,* also cited in my introduction to *Film & History. Special Focus: Medieval Period on Film,* vol. 29, 1–2 (1999): 7.

6. Rosenbaum, "The Battle of Armor, the Softness of Flesh: Bresson's *Lancelot du Lac,*" pp. 204–205.

7. David John Williams, "Looking at the Middle Ages in the Cinema: an Overview," *Film & History. Special Focus: Medieval Period on Film,* vol. 29, 1–2 (1999): 9.

8. Rohmer's *Perceval* shares a painterly sensibility with *The Lady and the Duke,* directed by Rohmer in 2002. The latter is set during the French Revolution and drawn directly from the diary of an aristocratic eyewitness, Grace Elliott, the mistress and later the friend of the Duke of Orleans. Though realism of staging is not central to either effort—*Perceval* was shot entirely on a sound stage, and the *Lady and the Duke* utilizes sets painted on canvas—both films give the viewer the sense of being a fly on the wall, present at each crucial scene.

Authenticating Realism in Medieval Film

WILLIAM F. WOODS

This is an essay about the authenticating features of medieval film, the ways in which we are led to accept the illusion on screen as a convincing version of the medieval world. The focus of the illusion and of this discussion is the medieval film hero. We will begin with an examination of the realism of Johan Huizinga's historical narrative and its close cousin, cinematic medievalism, which attracts us on sensible but also spiritual levels, both levels dependent upon the mundane details that create the realistic surface of the film narrative. The essay's second and third parts deal with those details and the ways in which they enhance the image, character, and thematic force of the hero.

I

"To the world when it was half a thousand years younger," Huizinga says at the beginning of his classic social history, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, "[a]ll experience had yet to the minds of men the directness and absoluteness of the pleasure and pain of child-life.... We, at the present day, can hardly understand the keenness with which a fur coat, a good fire on the hearth, a soft bed, a glass of wine, were formerly enjoyed."[1] From sensations he passes to sentiments, concluding that emotions, too, were closer to the surface in medieval times. Everyday life had a "tone of excitement and ... passion," veering as it did "between despair and distracted joy, between cruelty and pious tenderness."[2] The authority of Huizinga's great history, not to mention its enduring popularity, rests partly on its ability to present the experience of medieval life as sensuous, immediate, and, in a basic sense, authentic. The close attention to the

tiny details of mundane experience, the emphasis on human suffering, on the emotional extremes of terror, exaltation, or joy, the sense that a meaning, indeed a complex of meanings lay behind ordinary acts and perceptions, lending them a significance beyond themselves and a kind of order—these and other authenticating devices are the means by which Huizinga creates a medieval world that has the density and immediacy of lived experience and that presents an affect very similar to that of cinematic realism.

For despite their mythic overtones and romance coloring, films with medieval themes, like medieval histories, are required by their audiences to deliver a convincing picture of life. We reject out of hand costume dramas and sword-and-sorcery fantasies, just as we smile at the paradings of the Society for Creative Anachronism. Nonetheless, the authenticity we suppose we are looking for proves elusive. Would we recognize real medieval life if we saw it? And if medieval reality were revealed to us, in a sort of dream vision perhaps, what would be the charm of that artless, unaesthetic view? Some films do indeed gain our assent, but it is not the historical accuracy, necessarily, that moves our acceptance, or brilliant dialogue, or camera work. When we connect with the world of the film, when we can share some difficulty, some desire that is simplified, made a little strange, and in a way, vitalized by *what we can accept* as authentic features of medieval reality, *then* our resistance fades, and the scene breaks upon us with the force of real experience.

The most compelling medieval films have this kind of power because they invite their audience to collaborate with them in what could be called a shared cinematic medievalism. "Medievalism" may be defined as simply looking backward and, as Cervantes put it, imagining our past. When medieval films are made and when they are viewed, modern notions, emotions, and sensibilities are projected backward into the past, shaping and being shaped by what is known of the medieval world. Necessarily, what is constructed in this kind of activity is a communal fantasy, since writers, directors, viewers, and even historical consultants tacitly agree to accept—if only for the duration of the movie—the same version of medieval reality. This agreed-upon fantasy is the core truth of every medieval film. A world that lives in the imaginations of writers and directors is brought to the screen in such a way that it breaches the walls of our disbelief, and unconsciously we begin to contribute from our own experience, adapting the shared vision to create our own perception of the medieval world.

But what is it, exactly, that enables us to suspend our disbelief? In a basic sense, medieval film, like Huizinga's narrative, engages the senses and the emotions directly, heightening our sense of the ordinary. The medieval world on film is usually a romantic vision then, in a sense that
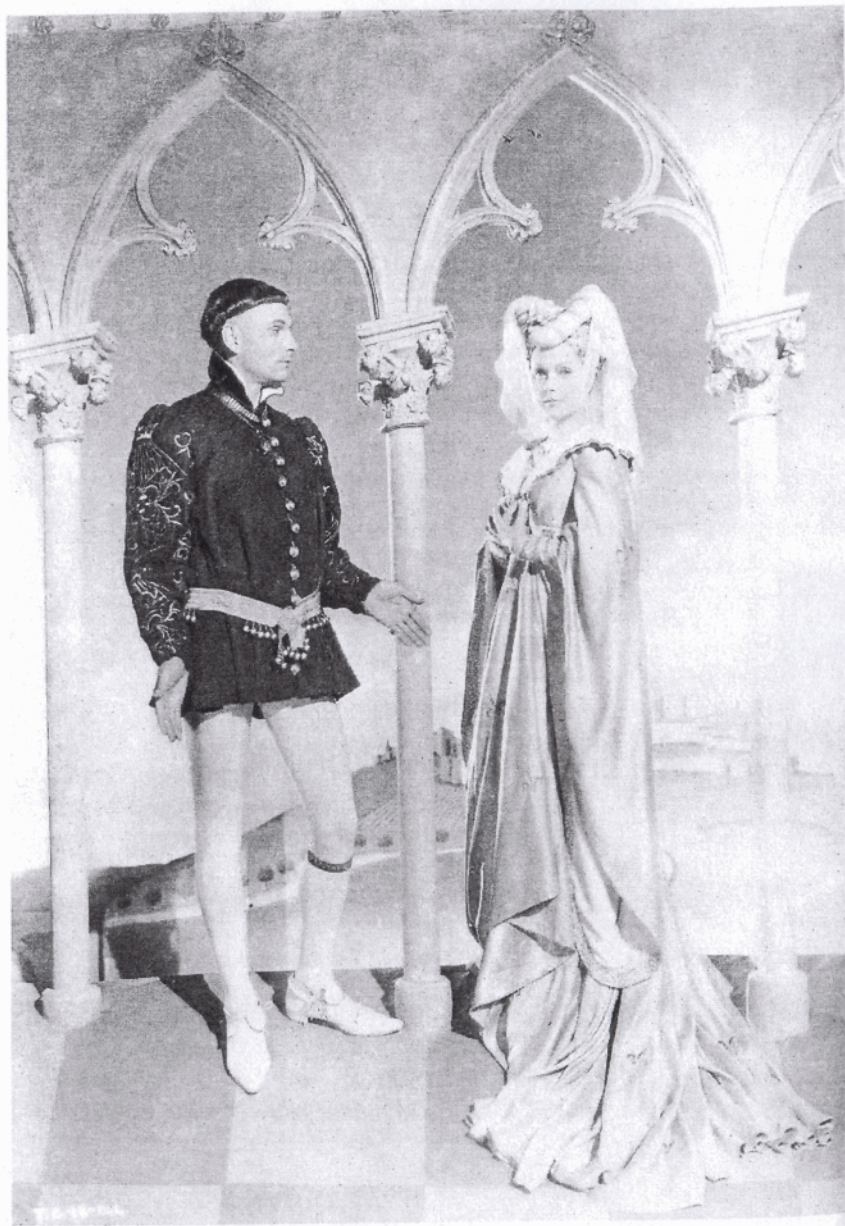
Henry V (Lawrence Olivier) in authentic period attire, with his prospective bride, in *Henry V* (1945).

Wordsworth would have recognized. Yet it is not necessarily an idealized version of primitivism—neither a pastoral idyll nor what Eco has called "shaggy medievalism."[3] Searching for immediacy in medieval experience and for authenticating features that suggest it will lead us not only through the blood and mire of medieval battles (e.g., *Henry V*, *Braveheart*), the dark, smoky interiors of peasants' huts (*The Return of Martin Guerre*), or exuberant barnyard sex (*The Advocate*), but also into experience one might call spiritual or intellectual. For there can be a piercing emotional quality to the lives of saints—Saint Joan, for instance, or Saint Francis, to mention two frequently filmed stories. Even Brother William of Baskerville (Sean Connery in *The Name of the Rose*), despite his deft intellectual style, is drawn into a crisis of identity and potential self-sacrifice.

The characteristic immediacy of medieval film attracts us on two levels, then: first, through the senses and emotions, and second, and more important, through the linked problems of loyalty, faith, and identity. Films such as *The Advocate*, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, and *The Seventh Seal* retain their peculiar sense of authentic medieval experience because they raise questions in real and insistent ways that are also our own: among them, who we are, whom we serve, and why. We confront such questions within the historical world of these films, which means we must shed much of our protective armor—our enabling but also insulating cultural sensibility—and battle imaginatively with the conflicts such stories raise as if we were peasants, princes, or saints. It is the sensible and spiritual poignancy of their vision of human experience that makes the most engaging medieval films feel authentic; and this particular form of authenticity—realistic yet reflective—is the definitive quality of cinematic medievalism. The authenticating features that we are about to examine—some of them so elementary that viewers scarcely notice them—provide us with a practical means and a vocabulary for discussing medieval films and their heroes.

II

For the most part, our sense of what is real or authentically medieval in a film depends upon perceptual realism—what we see there. Nevertheless, our first impression in a medieval film is generally formed by what we are told. There will be a voice-over or perhaps only a text crawling up the screen that frames the upcoming story by telling us when and where a conflict occurred and often what the complications were—war, plague, hunger, for example. The medieval movie tends to be framed, like certain famous works of medieval fiction. To a degree, the framing statement establishes genre, just as fairy tales have to begin with "Once

upon a time" (it would be hard to know how to respond to them, how to *read* them, if they did not). Medieval movies may not necessarily be fairy tale romances like *Star Wars* ("Once long ago, in a galaxy far, far away…") yet, inescapably, they tell old stories. Implicit is the assumption that we will be testing our times, our experience, against theirs, and that is part of the fun. The opening statement of a medieval film invites our interaction with what we encounter in the story, which in turn creates a bias in favor of accepting it as a substitute for real experience. Also understood (without our thinking about it much) is that the framing assertion is a kind of truth claim. Merely by making the statement (e.g., "These are medieval times"), the narrator asserts its truth, thereby bringing to bear what Grodal, in his study of realism in audio-visual representation, has called "a central means of transmitting a feeling of reality and factuality."[4] In effect, because we are told the film is going to be authentically medieval and, at this point, we have no reason to disagree, we are prepared to accept it as so.

Very quickly the framing statement ends and the action begins, if it has not been in progress since the beginning. Often the opening shot places us in company with someone on a journey—monks, for example, riding slowly across mountain meadows toward a forbidding Benedictine abbey, as in *The Name of the Rose.* Or consider the opening of *Excalibur,* where, waiting in the Wagner-tormented dark, we see a point of brightness out in the barren lands, a torch—Merlin (!) coming to shed some light on Uther's benighted realm. The need for initial movement and more generally for on-screen action is so obvious as to escape notice, if we were not scrutinizing what feeds the roots of medieval film realism. The perceptual processes that create our basic sense of reality are linked to our "motor-based relations to the world…. Those things, those perceptions are real that can guide our (re)actions."[5] In other words, we tend to see something as real when we have already had the experience of reacting to it or something like it. In extreme cases, we find our muscles twitching as we watch, as if we ourselves had to ward off a sword stroke or enter into the dance. This basic reactivity is fundamental to our response to most movies, and when the range of action is severely restricted, as it is in Bresson's *Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc,* where Joan and her prosecutor recite the words of the trial with frozen faces, their bodies rigid, we are acutely aware of its lack. Furthermore, given our preconceptions of the medieval world, it seems that we might associate the authentically medieval with particular kinds of physical action—men on horseback, for instance, or swordplay, plowing, prayer.

In medieval film narratives, as in medieval romances, the jousting, feasting, and journeying seize our attention, yet our ultimate concern is not the events themselves, but the inner logic that determines the sequence, severity, tonality, and finally the significance of events. The logic or relevance of the action depends upon the character or, to be precise, the agency of the medieval protagonist. That is why a discussion of cinematic medievalism must focus not merely on the experience represented by the film but on heroic experience, the way in which the action is oriented by the subjectivity—the identity, abilities, background, problems, and desires—of the film's hero.

In heroic narratives, the action occurs in precisely the ways necessary to show off the hero's courage and limitations and often to reveal the inevitability of the tragic ending. The plot mechanism is that he or she must make choices. The need for Bertrande to choose between the two men who claim to be her husband, Martin Guerre, is paradigmatic for all heroes on film. Such choices demonstrate the inner logic of the narrative but—and this is important for our sense of the authentic—they also dramatize the problematic nature of the medieval experience. Given a hostile world and their own resurgent weaknesses, human beings must make hard choices, plan carefully, deny their fears, and defer desires. Indeed, the primary way we participate in medieval film is by taking upon ourselves the hero's problems, planning, feeling his or her hesitation— trying to figure out what we would do in Lancelot's place, for example, had we his beauty and strength, his touching loyalty, and Guinevere.

Should we list just a few types of medieval hero—just the major ones, to get that medieval flavor? Surely this is the place to parade our somber knights (*The Seventh Seal*), tragic queens (*The Lion in Winter*), exalted saints (*La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*), even an idealistic lawyer, and a philosophic monk (*The Advocate, The Name of the Rose*). They pass in review and they are splendid. After all, they are the main reason we came to the medieval movies in the first place.

What about women as heroes in medieval film? The female heroes are sometimes seen as predictable—martyred saints and tragic Guineveres, Iseults, witches, and madwomen. Marjory Kempe and Margaret Paston have yet to be seen on film. As with the male heroes, the range of roles does not seem especially broad. I myself would very much like to see a film about Margery Kempe, but the world of medieval movies is deeply dyed in the colors of romance and folktale, and it is most unlikely, although much to be hoped, that we will soon see films of the caliber of *The Return of Martin Guerre* starring heroes like Margery. Among an intriguing variety of mostly aristocratic or saintly female heroes, at least one of them is dark-hearted, if that is what one could call Morgana, the tarty villain of *Arthur's Quest,* who is a kind of anti–Wonder Woman.

More important, in any case, is the general principle that whoever the hero happens to be, he or she tends to be reflective by nature and

will probably suffer in the course of the film. Let us consider actual heroic behaviors, reflective ones to begin with. At the beginning of *The Advocate*, for example, just after the framing statement and the opening credits, we are treated to a close-up of a crow. This fellow darts his head here, there, behind, with a bird's impossible quickness, while the sound track plays a brooding theme we soon come to know as "the lawyer's music." The camera then cuts to the coach where the Advocate Courtois, recently of Paris, has fallen asleep. As he peers out into the dark, drizzling night of his dream, we see the first of his long, pondering, brown-eyed gazes. These long looks recur throughout the film, carrying its major themes (the idealistic Courtois, having left the wicked city for the small, unhappy town of Abbeville, is there to see and sift everything). The crow moves us toward the idea of Courtois as an eagle-eyed representative of truth and justice, and Courtois himself shows us that there is much to ponder in fifteenth-century France.

For the viewer, these long, thoughtful glances are an invitation to enter the film, to interact, as it were, by pondering along with the advocate questions of natural law and human identity that the film raises. As we commit ourselves to weighing these questions, their context—the town of Abbeville, including the corrupt prosecutor, the lord with his frigid humor, the compromised priest—becomes real for us. Other examples of brooding looks on screen come easily to mind, the most striking of them being Renée Falconetti's silent, heartbreaking gazes in *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*, Tilda Swinton's very long, ambivalent gazes into the camera in *Orlando*, and even Richard Harris's gaze in his role as Arthur in *Camelot*, which reveals Arthur's agony of indecision and gives it a credibility that is mainly lacking in Malory.

Arthur is reflective but he is also in pain, torn between Guinevere, his wife, and Lancelot, who is his right hand. Courtly love by definition is almost sure to involve pain, and pain can hardly be separate from the warfare, jousts, the seven deadly sins, and famine that we have come to associate with medieval stories. But rather than being an incidental result of authentic medieval life, pain is itself a primary authenticating feature. We tend to take narrative seriously; we consider it more lifelike, more authentic, "when vital human (or animal) concerns [are] at stake," Grodal says,[6] and pain or the possibility of it raises the stakes. Grodal's analysis of this equation is illuminating:

> A consequence of the principle that a strong feeling of reality demand[s] that vital human or animal concerns be at stake is that "realism" is more often attributed to representations that portray negative emotions than those that portray positive emotions. This is perhaps based on the assumption that "pain" is more real than "pleasure," thus evoking more genuine behavior.[7]

We remember, he adds, that Freud called those (associative) mechanisms that were linked to pain the "reality principle" as opposed to the "pleasure principle."[8]

But given that pain is a universal signifier of the harsh reality of the human condition, can it also be a feature that has a particularly authenticating force in medieval film? Both trivial and more profound scenes come readily to mind. The trivial might be the sad group of extras— old men, women, children, and youths—standing in a cold rain, their rough clothing soaked, their breaths smoking in the Norwegian chill as they wait for Kirk Douglas to row up the fjord in his Viking ship (*The Vikings*). The scene seems authentic. As for the excruciating, there is richness of choice, but being burned at the stake has a ritual starkness that gives it pride of place over all the other agonies. One thinks first of the many Joan of Arcs who have died thus on film. But this motif has been used in various other contexts—the burning of the fool, the peasant girl, and the heretic monk in *The Name of the Rose*, for example, or the young girl who is burned in *The Seventh Seal*. Antonius Block, the weary, God-deserted knight, kneels over the condemned girl and with an exhausted pity, which increases our sense of the blind pointlessness of the death and its inevitability, gives her an anodyne before she is burned. Insofar as we tend to think of medieval people as being vulnerable to cold, hunger, war, pestilence, and so forth, it probably seems natural to accept life's promise of pain, the pain lending a sort of weight to that experience, a burden of the real. Virtually every medieval film provides additional examples. We have only to remember that the pain does not have to be bloody or physical to create authenticity. In the most convincing of these films, the sources of pain can be subtle indeed.

III

More commonly, however, the pain in medieval movies *is* physical and bloody, and that is because our sense of the real is fundamentally visual; we tend to believe what we see. "All other things being equal," Grodal says, "perceptual uniqueness and complexity enhance the feeling of realism, because the representation is directly simulated in our brains as if we were confronted with reality."[9] We watch the action happen on the screen and we live it for about a hundred minutes. We live it partly as Lancelot or Joan of Arc because we unconsciously react to the perceptual world as he or she (like any hero) focuses it for us.

That said, we can proceed to how we might judge the visual authenticity of a medieval film; in short, why does *The Return of Martin Guerre* look real, while *Excalibur* does not? Essentially, the more we can enjoy

The traveling players from *The Seventh Seal* (1957).

the hero's facial expressions and spoken lines, the better established and more particular his character becomes.

In *The Seventh Seal*, for instance, Antonius Block is a tall, fine-looking knight whose role is allegorical. He plays chess with Death, after all. His face is that of a man on a quest; close-up shots are unusual, and we do not miss them. But the face of William Wallace, played by Mel Gibson in *Braveheart*, is constantly before us in close-up, whether he is weeping, raging, or wearing barbaric face paint. Here it is the character we identify with, not so much the idea. We want him to be real and beautiful in close-up—hence the long hair, the face paint, the mask of battle-rage as the ragged ranks of Scots and English race toward each other with axes and claymores held high—and we also require consistency in his role. We need to see the emotional implications of that face carried out in appropriate body language (notice too how Wallace *walks* in this movie, every stride strongly separate, as if he were advancing against an enemy). His dialogue must be characteristic and all the features of the action must visually extend the reach and depth of his character.

There is much to be said for "perceptual uniqueness." We go to medieval movies for blood and iron, banners snapping in the wind, smoky

banquet halls, and tragic women. Many of us will never forget the unearthly beauty of Elizabeth Taylor as Rebecca in *Ivanhoe*. Others might remember Olivia Hussey when she played the same role, or Michelle Pfeiffer in *Ladyhawke*. The point is not so much that we fall in love with Gibson's face, or Taylor's, or even that we love to identify with it, making it ours. In the banners and banquet halls, but far more through observing the faces of these medieval heroes, we experience what William Wallace feels for Scotland under the iron fist of England or we feel something of the pride and sadness of the hard life of medieval Jews. In the most compelling of our movies a face presents a layered reality, and that too contributes to the illusion of medieval realism.

When viewers argue the authenticity of a film or the lack of it, they usually mean realism based on decorum or fittingness. One hesitates to complain that a director has put a fifteenth-century bridle on a four-teenth-century horse (although that is a common sort of pretentious-ness), but some flaws—a prominent anachronism, perhaps, or an accent that strongly reminds us of a modern time or place (one thinks of Kevin Costner's casual surfer-boy inflection in *Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves*)—do destroy the consistency of the illusion, eroding our emotional investment in the film. The perceptual complexity has been compromised; the sense of historical depth disappears, and we are left looking at a movie set.

What is interesting is not how seldom Hollywood makes such a mistake (experts tell us that very little of what we see is historically accurate) but how unusual it is that a lapse of authenticity tears the fabric of the viewer's sense of the authentic. As an audience, we are extraordinarily tolerant of inconsistencies, perhaps because our feeling for the authentic can be sustained by what seems typical, the kinds of clothes, gestures, and so forth that we expect of medieval reality. Our prior knowledge of the medieval, built up from watching films and from other sources, allows for a range of specificity in the unique image. There is a register of descriptive features we can accept for a Robin Hood or, for that matter, a castle in *Ivanhoe*, and we eagerly accept any version that does not clearly violate that category; many versions of a peasant's jacket would seem authentic, in other words, but not one trimmed in sumptuous fur.

Our sense of the typical in medieval life deserves special attention because it is the primary basis of cinematic medievalism—the way modern viewers conceive the Middle Ages. The medievalism of film is attractive because it is a paradox, both a comfort and an implicit threat. Presented with Camelot, we are suddenly at ease. We know pretty well what to expect from Gawain, Guinevere, and the rest. Lancelot can be Cornel Wilde (*The Sword of Lancelot*) or Franco Nero (*Camelot*), but the ground rules are the same; the loyalties and betrayals we love are replayed

on the violent medieval turf, with horses thundering, men bleeding, women privileged, imperiled, scheming. What we can accept as authentically medieval, in other words, is partly what we think we know and partly what we need to think and feel about that dim medieval twilight when pain, death, and taxes were so much closer to the bone. The stereotypes found on film—medieval life was dirty, dangerous, sexy, ignorant, passionate, doomed, and so on—are important. If these medieval stereotypes strike us as regressive, too easy, perhaps as a kind of infantile projection, remember that they are a common denominator, a simple but effective device for accessing our emotions. Those who think this an unfair remark should consider the farting contest at the end of that very successful film, *A Knight's Tale*.

But if we acknowledge the murky underlying attractions of the medieval stereotypes—the excremental humor and the barnyard sex (*The Advocate* had to be edited to earn its R rating)—we must also give attention to medievalism at the other end of the scale—the overarching themes and the structures of obsessive ideas that are equally a source of authenticity in medieval movies. This is where the medieval hero, the focusing presence of the film, matters most, and this is where, if we can accept it, we feel the implicit threat. For we live the film's events and emotions through our heroic surrogate, and the blows of fortune, the lovers, the loneliness and joy are viscerally powerful for that reason. But the ideology of the film, the organizing necessities, and the unexamined assumptions of its medieval world (mingled, naturally, with modern ideologies projected onto the film by its makers and in reception by its viewers) also depend essentially on the hero. Grodal associates this aspect of cinematic realism with Plato's idealist tradition:

> The schemas are the mentally pertinent features in the experience of the ever-changing phenomenal world. Therefore I propose that there is a kind of "schematic salience" that provides a feeling of reality that is abstract and atemporal ... the power of which comes from being the mental essence of many different experiences, in contrast to the feeling of perceptual salience that is connected to the temporal, specific and unique.[10]

As Grodal explains, the perceptual and the schematic are complementary in a film. What we see creates the film's perceptual realism, while what we know (the organizing concepts that govern what we see) creates our sense of its reality.[11]

In some films, visual realism may seem to dominate, in others, the cognitive sense of reality. *First Knight* has been criticized as, if not a mindless film, then a film distinguished by "the irresolute flatness of [its]

characterizations."[12] Yet the middle-aged Richard Gere still projects some of the wildness of his earlier roles, and as we watch him casually win at swordplay or ride (unhelmeted) into battle, we are entertained. *The Seventh Seal*, on the other hand, moves toward allegory. And in Bresson's *Le Procès de Jeanne D'Arc* the burden of ideas presses so heavily as to move the film toward a kind of moral didacticism. Joan sits motionless under the scrutiny of the inquisitors, returning her answers without hesitation but also without inflection or facial expression, so that finally she seems more a representative of the idea of righteous innocence than an innocent character cruelly examined.

Loyalty, faith, identity are abstract schemas and have their own sense of reality, but in medieval movies we do not experience them in the abstract. They are, after all, real to the hero, in ways that cost him or her enormous pain. But our need to see the hero torn between loyalties, faiths, identities does not arise from sadism but from a need to be torn ourselves, transfixed inescapably by the necessity of doing what we must, believing as we do, being who we are. Medieval films, like most stories, are fables of identity but they are set in a harder world than ours where the demands of loyalty and faith are absolute. This is not the unbearable lightness of being—which is a modern affliction—but its opposite, where being is the still center, and all other things fall into orbit around it, transient and relative to the ineluctable identity of the self. We need such hyperbolic terms to describe the martyrdom of Saint Joan or, for that matter, the martyrdoms of Thomas Becket and William Wallace. Like them, Richard Courtois, the advocate, in his quest for justice and William of Baskerville in his quest for the truths of earth and heaven hold to their own truth with great force despite enormous difficulties, which often—no, *always*—offer the truly frightening opportunity of recantation, betrayal, and the abandonment of self. Like no other films, medieval movies call upon us to be authentically ourselves, if only in the person of Courtois or William, if only until the final credits.

Notes

1. Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, tr. F. Hopman (1924; New York: Doubleday, 1954), p. 9.

2. Huizinga, p. 10.

3. Umberto Eco, "Dreaming of the Middle Ages," in *Travels in Hyperreality* (1967; London: Picador, 1987), p. 69.

4. Torben Grodal, "The Experience of Realism in Audiovisual Representations," in *Realism and "Reality" in Film and Media*, ed. Anne Jerslev (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press [University of Copenhagen], 2002), p. 84.

5. Grodal, p. 83.

6. Grodal, p. 86.
7. Grodal, p. 87.
8. Grodal, p. 87.
9. Grodal, p. 70.
10. Grodal, p. 81.
11. Grodal, p. 82.
12. Robert S. Blanch and Julian N. Wasserman, "Fear of Flyting: The Absence of Internal Tension in *Sword of the Valiant* and *First Knight*," *Arthuriana* 10.4 (2000): 28.

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Filmography

1928 *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (*The Passion of Joan of Arc*), d. Carl Theodor Dreyer, with Renée Falconetti, Antonin Artaud. France: Société Générale des Films.

1952 *Ivanhoe*, d. Richard Thorpe, with Robert Taylor, Elizabeth Taylor. U.S.: MGM.

1957 *The Seventh Seal*, d. Ingmar Bergman, with Max Von Sydow. Sweden: Svensk Filmindustri.

1958 *The Vikings*, d. Richard Fleischer, with Kirk Douglas. U.S.: Bryna Productions, United Artists.

1962 *Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* (The Trial of Joan of Arc), d. Robert Bresson, with Florence Carrez. France: Agnès Delahaie Productions.

1963 *The Sword of Lancelot*, d. Cornel Wilde, with Cornel Wilde, Jean Wallace. U.K./U.S.: Emblem, Universal.

1964 *Becket*, d. Peter Glenville, with Peter O'Toole, Richard Burton. U.K./U.S.: Keep Films, Paramount.

1967 *Camelot*, d. Joshua Logan, with Richard Harris, Vanessa Redgrave. U.S.: Warner Bros., Seven Arts.

1968 *The Lion in Winter*, d. Anthony Harvey, with Katherine Hepburn, Peter O'Toole. U.K.: Haworth Productions.

1981 *Excalibur*, d. John Boorman, with Nicol Williamson. U.S.: Orion.

1982 *The Return of Martin Guerre*, d. Daniel Vigne, with Gerard Depardieu, Nathalie Baye. France: Société Française de production cinematographique.

1985 *Ladyhawke*, d. Richard Donner, with Rutger Hauer, Michelle Pfeiffer, Matthew Broderick. U.S.: Warner Bros., 20th Century–Fox.

1986 *The Name of the Rose*, d. Jean-Jacques Annaud, with Sean Connery. German Federal Republic/Italy/France: Neue Constantin, Cristaldifilm, Ariane Productions.

1989 *Henry V*, d. Kenneth Branagh, with Kenneth Branagh, Emma Thompson. U.K.: BBC, Renaissance Films.

1991 *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, d. Kevin Reynolds, with Kevin Costner, Morgan Freeman. U.S.: Morgan Creek.

1993 *Orlando*, d. Sally Potter, with Tilda Swinton. U.K.: Columbia, Tri Star.

1994 *The Advocate*, d. Leslie Megahey, with Colin Firth. France/U.K.: BBC Films, CiBy 2000, British Screen, European Co-production Fund.

1995 *Braveheart*, d. Mel Gibson, with Mel Gibson. U.S.: Icon Productions, Ladd, 20th Century–Fox.
       First Knight, d. Jerry Zucker, with Richard Gere, Julia Ormond, Sean Connery. U.S.: Zucker Brothers, Columbia.

1998 *Arthur's Quest*, d. Neil Mandt, with Arye Gross, Alexandra Paul, Catherine Oxenberg. U.S.: Crystal Sky Communications.

2001 *A Knight's Tale*, d. Brian Helgeland, with Heath Ledger. U.S.: Columbia, Escape Artists/Finestkind Productions.