

Movies, Literature, & History



**What are the
characteristics of the
medieval warrior?**

Using *The Wanderer* as a base,

- Loyalty to the leader
- Want to be remembered for battle glory
- Not loners—belong to a brotherhood & lean on it. The *comitatus* or *werod*
- Not afraid to die, especially for honor, respect, justice, pride, or his lord
- Devotion to family (but second to devotion to lord)
- Searching for place in community

And what are the responsibilities of the warrior's lord, his "gold-friend"?

- Provide them with treasure, wealth, reward they have earned
- Entertainment—hospitality, food and shelter, hearth, sense of community
- Has a poet (scop) whose job is to retell stories of past heroes & fallen warriors, and compose new songs to celebrate current achievements
- Making sure that all these requirements are provided, make sure they win
- Fatherly/big brother/shepherd
- Able defender, warrior—first among equals?

Some of you may have recognized lines
92 ff....

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tzx6d5h-5Mg>



The Seventh Seal



How does Bergman dream the Middle Ages?

- Pretext: images of medieval allegory, timeless morality tale, modern poem, freely handled medieval
- Cautionary: painter painting the dance of death, ending, flagellants
- Ironic: actors, the “fool” actor is the wisest person
- Philosophical: existentialism
- Philological: reconstruction that critiques the time period, the struggle about religion, jobs, aspects of the time

WHY does Bergman dream the Middle Ages?

- 1950s: threat of nukes, soldier coming home to broken world, effects of a Holocaust
- Apocalypse—one of the Seals is world wars..
- Knight wants to prove there's more to life—strawberry scene, confession scene, thief who was a divinity student, turned rapist, dies of plague
- Hopeful...they survived & we will too
- Look at what the seals are in the Apocalypse—all happened then so perfect allegory...
- B&W *appears* to simplify but actually lets him play with complexity—mirrors, duality
- Religion—barbaric and Christianity

Beowulf and its construction of the Middle Ages



What is a folk-epic?

- Tale recording historical or pseudo-historical events in a distant past that are foundational to the beliefs of a tribe, nation, or culture
- Transmitted orally, with additions and reshapings by almost every teller, who mixed familiar allusions & set pieces with new material
- In “high literary” terms, a more ‘primitive’ form of the epic than the *art epic*

Examples of folk epics:

- *Gilgamesh*
- *The Iliad*
- *The Odyssey*
- *Beowulf*
- *The Niebelungenlied*
- *The Epic of Son-Jara*
(a/k/a the *Sundiata*)



Harmon & Holman *Handbook to Literature*, 9th ed., on *Art Epic*:

“The *art epic* is supposed to be more sophisticated and more consciously moral in purpose than the folk epic. The author takes greater liberties with popular materials and expects less credulity. The events narrated are typically in a more remote past.”

So when we consider the literary *Beowulf*....

- We see evidence of oral composition in clumsy transitions, incomplete integration of Christian and pagan materials, and other signs that more than one author was responsible for the story before a late tenth-century scribe copied it down
- We see certain values, concepts, and ideas reinforced and elaborated upon, showing us what the culture as a whole found important

Which leads us to several important questions:

- Even though *Beowulf* contains historically-identifiable figures, is it in any way a historical poem?
- Whose dream(s) of the Middle Ages does the poem reflect?
- From modern critical perspectives (Eco, Driver, and others), what is the importance of the *Beowulf* story?

A quote from Driver:

Movies, in other words, do not need the trappings of costume drama to teach the lessons of the past. Many of the most instructive and enduring films about the Middle Ages do not try literally to replicate the precise details of historical events. Ingmar Bergman's iconic *Seventh Seal* (1957) employs images of medieval allegory to create a timeless morality tale that also includes modern existentialist themes. In the print program produced for the film's premiere, Bergman explained that "It is a modern poem, presented with medieval material that has been very freely handled." (165)

Here are a series of quotes to consider from the Driver article.

As the historian and film expert Robert A. Rosenstone has suggested, the past created by movies “is not the same as the past provided by traditional history, but it certainly should be called history – if by that word we mean a serious encounter with the lingering meaning of past events.”
(159)

Rosenstone, in particular, has stressed that “written history is not a solid and unproblematic object but a mode of thought, [and] so is the historical film.”(164)

Film is powerful. Even as a comparatively recent medium, movies, like drama, have had a profound impact on the historical memory, functioning, like the actors described by Hamlet, as “the abstract and brief chronicles of the time” (*Hamlet* II.2.520). (p. 167)

The argument has been put forward that because of the emphasis on a comparatively simple story line, film narrative is less accurate than written history; further, it has no footnotes and no scholarly apparatus...Rosenstone has pointed to the problem...: "Film offers us history as the story of a closed, completed, and simple past," which may be true, but not when one considers the larger context of modern renderings of older texts, whether historical or literary. (166)

Panofsky's complication of the marketplace...

[I]f commercial art be defined as all art not primarily produced in order to gratify the creative urge of its maker but primarily intended to meet the requirements of a patron or a buying public, it must be said that noncommercial art is the exception rather than the rule. (161)

Erik Rohmer quote

He was “searching to rediscover the vision of the Medieval period **as it saw itself**. This, it seems to me, one can attempt to accomplish, while we will never know the Middle Ages as they really were.” (165-66, **emphasis Dr K's**)

How to Talk about Film



First, master standard terms.

- Excellent source: [Dartmouth Glossary of Film Terms](#)
- [Illustrated](#) source for terms:
<http://www.filmsite.org/filmterms.html>

Watch films critically

- Pay attention to the elements of the film's composition
- Pick two or three elements to focus on (e.g. pacing, lighting, dialogue, etc.) and take notes on these—don't try to note EVERYTHING in one viewing
- Notice the technical tools the director uses to tell the story—establishing shots, closeups, wide shots, soundtrack, etc.
- Don't just try to summarize the film (what happened in it); go beyond that to what the filmmaker(s) wanted to say, what the 'message' might be, or limit yourself to basic literary survey questions (e.g. plot, setting, characterization). Film can do things that print texts can't—ask yourself what these are.

As Dartmouth advises, “think outside the frame.”

- Think about the people who made the film
- Think about the production history
- Look at what critics and scholars say
- Think about genre
- Think about the film’s context, its timeliness, and its cultural circumstances—for instance, Leni Riefenstahl’s films are inevitably considered in the light of her work for Adolf Hitler.