Authenticity and Accuracy in Medieval Film

A simple glance at the range, diversity and sheer quantity of films purporting to represent the European Middle Ages reveals, more than anything else, a staggering number of them; according to one count, there are purportedly some 850 films which treat the period in one way or another.[1] This abundance, then, is sufficient to show two things; first that it is impossible to write about trends pertaining to *all* of these films, as though they were one cohesive whole.[2] It is impossible to generalise about what they all 'do', since they all 'do' different things. Consequently, I will offer below only one or two ideas about some of these, limiting my specific examples to a handful of the more well-known works; it is only too easy to theorise about obscure works, and in any case, those which have survived both public and critical scrutiny are a far more reliable corpus of publicly "acceptable" medieval films.

   The second thing it shows us, closely tied to the first, is that not only are they all different in their implementation, but they all have a very different scope and aim in evoking their medieval worlds in the first place. Some, like *The Return of Martin Guerre*, are aiming for accuracy to the period to the greatest extent possible. These are the films which hire historical advisers (in this instance famously enlisting the services of Natalie Zemon Davis, whose book on the subject positioned her as a prominent authority);[3] they are equally the films which market themselves as "the true story", or others, like Boorman's infamous *Excalibur*, which aim to create an oneiric fantasy closer to a dream of the Middle Ages than an attempt to recreate the period "as it really was".[4] But this is only to look at historical accuracy, and as I will argue below, this is certainly not the only yardstick by which we can—or indeed should—be evaluating these films. A film like Rohmer's *Perceval le Gallois*, for example, while remarkably faithful to the literary text, can scarcely be said to represent everyday life in the Middle Ages—there is clearly an aesthetic concern at work here which transcends the mere attempts to get the details right. Still others, such as *Kingdom of Heaven* or *El Cid*, fall somewhere in between; they aim to get some of the details right, try to recreate the 'feel' of the period, while all the time concentrating on making a good film which conforms to the demands of continuity editing and making a good return. As A. Keith Kelly remarks in a perceptive article on this subject, "not all medieval films have as their goal historical accuracy".[5]

   If, therefore, they are all aiming to do different things, and they are not all aiming for a hyper-fidelity to the period, we consequently find ourselves in need of a tool in order to analyse them accordingly; it

seems unfair (at best, and misleading at worst) to criticise them for failing to do something which they never proposed to do in the first place. To demonstrate this point, we might use two films which both seek to recreate "the Middle Ages" in its various forms: Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* and Richard Thorpe's *Ivanhoe*.

Now, if we were to approach these two films from the standpoint of film criticism alone, there would be plenty to say about them. We might criticise *Ivanhoe*'s melodramatic acting, for instance, or identify in the epic mise-en-scène relics of the swashbuckling genre, as we see in Derek Elley's reading of the film;[6] we might, like François de la Bretèque, make deep insights into the use of space in the tournament scenes.[7] We might pursue this film by drawing comparisons between it and medieval symbology, as Pastoureau has done, eventually coming to the conclusion that while it betrays the spirit of the Middle Ages, it simultaneously updates it.[8] We might do none of these, and instead focus on whether *The Seventh Seal* accords with the auteurism of Bergman's oeuvre, or trace trends across the studio productions of the era, or the size of the frame, and the use of sound or costume. Whatever approach would be taken from a cinematographic point of view, however, it would be difficult to conclude that they were simply 'bad' or 'inaccurate' films, without a good deal of support.

If we approach them from an historical standpoint, however, we may again have some words to say about them. There will almost certainly be the odd anachronism, the occasion misunderstanding of a specific detail; the knight's return from the Crusade may be unlikely at this time, and so on. But we are still not able dismiss it as a 'bad film', since we are only criticising the historical details, and we must also remember that these are intended for an audience who would not be thinking necessarily along those same lines: provided there are no wristwatches and aeroplanes, modern audiences are remarkably forgiving. William Woods touches on the notion in his essay "Authenticating Realism", in which he argues that "what is interesting is not how seldom Hollywood makes such a mistake […] 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…".[9]

So we come to the point at which we must come up with a new way of approaching these films, one which at least provides us with a schema. One very common historical criticism levied at such films—albeit encountered anecdotally rather than critically—amounts to the rather vague complaint that they just don't have the right 'feel' to them. Such a dismissal is of course inadequate not only from the two perspectives outlined above, but also because to make the claim that they do not 'feel' right

presupposes that there is a 'right feel' in the first place. In trying to identify what this feeling is, too, we realise that each film has a very different ambience, sometimes even when trying to evoke the same era.[10]

A Standard Form of Criticism?

Thus even though these two films are two different portrayals of roughly the same period, we begin to see that criticisms along these lines are not likely to get us very far, for we are trying to compare films and history according to two very different critical standards. Thus accuracy versus inaccuracy—one of the most dominant modes of criticism of historical film up to this point—is no longer the only, nor even the most useful, way of measuring and analysing these films, for two main reasons:

1) there is, as I argue elsewhere, no definite 'single' version of events from which we can accuse them of deviating—this is the historiographic approach

2) they are not necessarily intended to be accurate 'historical' reconstructions in the first place—this is the cinematographic approach.

A cautionary note is required, however, for this second point. It is perhaps too easy to excuse a 'betrayal' of history as pure entertainment, on the basis that films in this tradition are merely harmless foibles. The reason for this is that, over the past few years, a number of the great critics of historical film—including Hayden White, Marc Ferro, Peter Rollins and Robert Rosenstone—have all devoted many pages to showing that films with historical themes can be important as historical works in themselves, and can, in certain circumstances, function as history in their own right, albeit differently to the written historical text.[11] Such a conclusion is most explicitly reached by Marnie Hughes-Warrington, in assertion that "…films are not a form of history but *are* history".[12] To dismiss them or to explicate them as simply a non-serious distraction is thus to exonerate them from the duty of what Rosenstone terms "responsible historical recreation".[13] It is clear, then, that historical filmmakers cannot simply have their cake and eat it. If we are to give them this freedom to write history, then they must also assume the concomitant responsibility of serious historical reconstruction, or else divest themselves of the "filmic history" mantle altogether.

So we come to something of an impasse: these films are not historical in the same sense as we would apply that word to a written history of the medieval period, for example, but they are not wholly

entertainment either, for they should make some attempt at least to stay as close to the facts as they can. We are also—and more importantly—dealing with a problem of how to *approach* these historical films, given the fact that they work on a variety of levels. Zemon Davis does employ one revealing phrase of relevance to my argument below, when she comments that, in the film *Day of Wrath*, "historical authenticity comes first and foremost from the film's credible connection with 'the spirit of the period'—in its large forms and sometimes in its small details".[14] The answer to this problem, then, might lie in the proposition that we are working with two levels in our filmed medieval worlds—one of accuracy and another, quite different, of authenticity. These levels can be identified with two levels on which the film is based: the level of objects, and the level of the worlds themselves.

Material worlds and the Historicon

On the basic level, the level of the set, soundstage, location, props, etc, we have the material worlds, "the world of things".[15] Hughes-Warrington convincingly argues that these 'things' themselves create a sense of historical accuracy, on the basis that "the truth of an historical phenomenon can be realised through the sheer accumulation of contemporary signs of the real."[16] We can see how this functions in the opening scene of Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, for the mise-en-scène is based on the accumulation of a number of identifiable medieval objects, framed by a static, medium-long shot, recreating the gaze of an impartial—and distinctly non-medieval—observer. These include things like the dagger, the white cross of the crusader (even if this belongs to the Hospitaliers, whose heyday lay further back in the twelfth century crusades), the sword belt and chain mail. The clothing thus becomes a sequence of signs which adhere sufficiently to received iconology (whether from film, from art or elsewhere is a study for another time) for us to be able to identify the roles without prompting: armour and cross belong to the knight; the snood, dagger and more dishevelled clothes force us to assume that his companion is a squire. Finally, we are by now no strangers to combinations of signs which Eisenstein has identified as ideograms (and which François de la Bretèque calls an iconogramme), so that our knowledge of the knight + cross image together points to a crusade, and their appearance on a beach + absence of ship = victims of a shipwreck.[17] The proliferation of material objects is sufficient to pinpoint a specific period to us. Without recourse to subtitles or title cards, we already 'know' that we are watching a film which will be about the Middle Ages. We have also, by the combination of a few basic signs and motifs, been able to piece together a rough background to the story—a (possibly shipwrecked) knight and his squire have returned from

the crusades. Furthermore, as a result of Bergman's mastery of cinematic minimalism, a few simple gestures from the knight suffice to connote a sense of the existentialist despondency which plagues the film throughout.

So we have seen so far that there can exist a certain series of 'signs' which are sufficient in most cases for us to summon up an entire time period with a surprising degree of accuracy and specificity. Celebrity culture has bequeathed to us a series of iconic signs which recall heroes of yesteryear (a blonde with flying skirts for Marilyn Monroe, a narrow moustache and a cane recall Chaplin, and Bogart can be recreated by a simple curled lip by Jean-Paul Belmondo). In the same vein, we can see Jonathan Rhys-Meyer with a very noticeably modern haircut playing Henry VIII, by the simple use of those large headpieces which we now call, conveniently, Tudor hats. If these signs exist, then perhaps they need a name, and I have, for convenience's sake termed the objects which make up this level "historicons". A 'historicon', therefore, means simply a "sign" as an indicator of a historical period, any object, item, character, gesture or historical reference. These objects can nowadays even include CGI-created actors for crowd scenes, christened with the wonderfully self-explanatory neologism "synthespians".

Now the next logical question which arises is how we can use these signs to build up a 'world'. We have seen already that Bergman is able to provide us with a number of these signs on the first level which we can combine to produce a second level, a level on which we begin to assign 'meaning' backwards to produce a 'backstory' (remember that we have, as yet, not had any dialogue before making our judgement). Therefore, these primary signs on the level of the material world form, by their accumulation, a sense of an entire world of the past. It is this accumulation of signs which we might describe as "ambientalism", and which is frequently the area which the historical advisor is called in to supervise; it is therefore the area to which many filmmakers pay their closest attention. Both Zemon Davis and Guneratre after her warn that the "usual marks of historical authenticity in films—period props, paintings, locations and local people" must not be relied on exclusively. "They add to the credibility and genuine historicity of the film only insofar as they are used with some discernment about their truth status."[18] Those films which force a proliferation of these signs often have very little to do with the evocation of a world, either, for it is these films which bring in the historical consultant to lend credibility to their projects, but their advice is often sought only for this lower level of historicons. Robert Brent Toplin, a prominent name in the field of history on film, writes, "many historians who have worked behind the scenes as consultants to film projects are not happy

with their experiences. They complain that filmmakers often assign them to advisory roles only to advertise that the films received a scholarly stamp of approval."[19] Yet in this case it does seem as though the filmmakers are right; outside of scholarship, it seems that the period look is a frequently evoked measure of authenticity, since "when viewers argue the authenticity of a film or the lack of it, they usually mean realism based on decorum or fittingness".[20] A lack of attention to such details, on the other hand, creates flaws which "destroy the consistency of the illusion, eroding our emotional investment in the film… the sense of historical depth disappears, and we are left looking at a movie set."[21]

In the realm of the material world, however, historical films very often seem to go too far in their attempts at verisimilitude on this level, eventually achieving a paradoxical 'false hyper-reality', by the revealing tendency to focus on the details at the expense of the overall 'feel' for the period.[22] It is precisely this tendency which Neely is criticising when he describes films as being "increasingly obsessed with what might be called 'accuracy in antiques'—having no anachronistic objects appear in the frames of pictures about the past".[23] The food for Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* for example, was flown in from a food art specialist in London since according to the chef "there's nothing worse in a historical film […] than having fruit straight from the supermarket."[24] Now, anybody who has ever spent a lot of time studying historical films will know that there is in fact a great deal that is worse than the wrong type of fruit in a historical film.

The advent of digital technologies such as CGI, bluescreen and post-production editing has also marked a renewed focus on the details over the specific world, so that in *Kingdom of Heaven*, for instance, just as in *Gladiator*, one piece can be made in fantastic detail, and subsequently digitally grafted onto the scene. The capabilities of digital technologies have thus given modern filmmakers incredible scope for developing the details of the worlds, the historicons, to the extent that even the weather itself can be changed to match the mood of the film.[25] The films, to paraphrase Baudrillard, might risk becoming "their own pure simulacrum", by dint of the absence of material relation to the basic historical reality.[26] But this is only the first level of the recreation of the worlds. We are forgetting that beyond the material props and effects lies a much greater premise: the 'forum'.

The Worlds as Forum

On the second level, we have the 'world' itself. This is already a more complicated notion, since it is the most difficult detail to spot. In many ways it is like the (probably apocryphal) example of the

ramblers trying—and failing—to find the Uffington white horse from the ground, while of course from the air it is unmistakeable. If the details of the material world may be termed historicons, the corresponding term for the world itself, I have argued, might perhaps be the forum. Put very simply, this 'forum' is the background of the world itself, or more frequently it is the prism through which we see the period. "Necessarily, what is constructed… is a communal fantasy. 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."[27] Here I want to refer back to the some of the films mentioned above to explain more clearly. We saw that both the 'serious' films (such as *Martin Guerre* or *The Seventh Seal*) as well as the more 'populist' works (like *Ivanhoe* and *Kingdom of Heaven*) had made some efforts—however successfully—to populate their material worlds with appropriate objects for the relevant period. Nevertheless, we could instantly see that the two films were operating from entirely different *conceptions*: that is to say that they approached the period from two very different starting points.

   A film like *Ivanhoe*, for example, has been filtered through a number of difficult and conflicting ideas (Walter Scott's romanticism, nineteenth-century medievalism, twentieth-century nostalgia; text to film adaptation, film to film adaptation, and so on, not to mention the 1950s climate of Cold War paranoia); Thorpe's 1952 version has consequently taken a somewhat idealised, pre-Raphaelite approach to the medieval period in which humans are ultimately good and the unjust are punished, where simple values prevail. As David Williams puts it, in the world of *Ivanhoe*, "Battles are vigorously fought, people are wounded and die, but they shed little visible blood; the sun shines as on a May morning, and the colourful costumes seem to be of a stuff that repels dirt."[28]

   On the other side of the coin, we have Bergman creating his medieval world using the same material signs, and roughly during the same period (only 5 years separate the two films), but viewed through the opposite perspective. In this case, the filmmaker finds parallels between the apocalyptic millennialism of the Cold War in Europe and the threat of the Black Death in the mid-14th century. He was also highly influenced by his upbringing as the son of a preacher, who was continually exposed to religious artworks, and consequently his vision of the medieval period is also drawn from the logic of medieval religion, from wall paintings and "the strangest vegetation of medieval paintings and carved figures on ceiling and walls", most prominent among which is the Totentanz- Dance of Death—a visual topos which he obviously imports directly into his work—and which served to colour his view of the period as a dark scourge of religious mania.[29]

When we are rejecting a medieval film on the basis of its 'feel', then, we must recognise that it is to this latter world—the forum—that we are often objecting most vehemently, and to which more serious objections can be made. Where entire websites can be created to outline "goofs", anachronisms, and historical inaccuracies on the level of the details and objects, when we come to examining the forum—the framework into which we are placing our medieval films—it is here that we are in more difficult territory. How, for example, do we prove that Gil Junger's *Black Knight* of 2002 is a 'bad medieval film'? Is it perhaps just a bad film which happens to be set in the Middle Ages (which, I would argue, on one level it is), or is it that it somehow betrays the Middle Ages (which it may also be doing, but this is much more difficult to prove)? Thus it is most often when the forum of the medieval world does not align with our own image of the period that we are most likely to take exception, not to its *accuracy* per se, but its *authenticity*. It is at the level of ideology that we are prone to dismiss a film with the claim that it just doesn't 'feel' right.

It is also on this level, the creation of a medieval world, at which we find the most difficult arguments about accuracy and inaccuracy. One consequently wonders whether we are perhaps placing undue emphasis on these terms as discrete categories. Perhaps there might exist *degrees* of inaccuracy; acceptable inaccuracy, for instance, might occur when a tournament setup from the fourteenth century replaces the appropriate twelfth-century version as in *Ivanhoe*; unacceptable inaccuracy might be when the knights are equipped with the kind of hand-held crossbow seen in *First Knight*, since we are dealing here not with an historical misplacement, but wanton and irresponsible invention. These issues are coupled with a more complicated one of authenticity, since the wrong tournament example from *Ivanhoe* comes from a film which both Michel Pastoureau considers to be "one of the best films ever made about the medieval period... by its very fidelity, it plunges the spectator into a universe at one familiar and fabulous".[30]

One way through the potential labyrinth of authenticity can be provided by the field of Reception Theory. Jauss, for one, argues that such a personal notion of authenticity is in fact created from an audience's horizon of expectations, which are not necessarily historically inclined, but linked to genre and are, put simply, 'what they are used to'.[31] So perhaps we can propose that if the authentic is a creation of both custom and accuracy, then we recognize that antipathy towards *First Knight* is not because it is inaccurate in the details, but its forum or ideology is so inaccurate and unusual that it breaks the suspension of disbelief, and consequently ruptures our belief in its authenticity. *Ivanhoe*, on the other hand, fits into a degree of inaccuracy which ranks within authenticity, the sort of error

which is used to preserve our belief in its authenticity, like those inaccuracies in the historical novel which Georg Lucács terms "necessary anachronism" and which Rosenstone calls "necessary invention".[32] These are deviations from the historical record wherever there either is a narrative necessity to do so (for Ivanhoe, he must fight five opponents in a masked tournament, and we must never lose our ability to recognise which knight he is), or in those more frequent occasions in which there simply is no historical record (we simply don't know how some characters might have spoken, for example). Marcus Bull stresses just this issue concerning the modern evocation of the period:

> There are notably many gaping holes in the evidence [of the Middle Ages] but also, and more insidiously, half-gaps which create as many problems of interpretation as they appear to resolve. In these circumstances, we are regularly required to draw on our imaginative resources—which is not, it must be stressed, the same as 'making things up'—in order to compensate for the grey areas in our understanding. [33]

George Macdonald Fraser tells a wonderful story of the filming of *The Epic That Never Was*, in which the authentically-costumed six Vestal Virgins are rejected by the director, von Sternberg on the grounds that this reality is not sufficiently spectacular for the screen. "I want sixty," he bellows, "and I want them naked".[34] The accuracy swapped was replaced by inaccuracy, the filming continued and the end result looked sumptuous, since the excess was precisely the sort of excess which we associate with Rome, even if, as Fraser concedes, "it had nothing to do with Roman religion". Thus, we can see here a curious case in which accuracy (the cold, unforgiving bedfellow of the academic Historian) is sacrificed in order to retain authenticity (a slippery and ultimately subjective notion, and therefore one which is ideally suited to an artform like the cinema). The decisions taken here, I am arguing, are questions which directly affect the creation of the world, rather than those errors of ambientalism, which are simply setting the scene.

The decisions taken about what kind of medieval world to evoke are therefore subject to a very personal view of the Middle Ages. Just as the medieval world on screen is evoked from an 'accumulation of the objects and signs', so too is the image of the medieval world evoked from the facts available to the filmmaker. As Paul Veyne observes, "when everything is a historical fact, history becomes those facts which we choose",[35] a contention echoed by Rosenstone's axiom that "History does not exist until it is created". [36] In this matter, one medievalist in particular is particularly vociferous; Norman Cantor, in his *Inventing the Middle Ages*, argues that the personal viewpoint of the medieval historian has just as strong an influence on the way in which we understand the period as the facts which they are assembling, for "we cannot interpret medieval culture or any historical culture except through the prism of the dominant concepts of our own thought world".[37] This sentiment echoes statements made about historical film, in which Pierre Sorlin's argument runs that

"instead of listing historical inaccuracies, we should be praising [these films as] a description of 'how men living at a certain time understood their own history'."[38] In this way, we might argue that these thought worlds are created from popular ideas about the Middle Ages, and not a wilful misrepresentation of the period, because the popular cinema is frequently working on a general consensus about the Middle Ages which has filtered down from the academics.

This is, in part, the reason for which I feel we need a theory of separate worlds when analysing these films, because it is the only way that we can objectively begin to go about deconstructing what is wrong or right with a given medieval-themed film. Such notions go some way to answering why we find it hard to establish a standard form of criticism with regards to historical films. But all of this means that instead of one level of accuracy, that of the material props, locations, characters and even events, we have these several degrees of accuracy within the inception of the 'forum'. The degree to which a film adheres to a faithful depiction of the medieval period is dictated by the way in which we imagine it as much as, if not far more than, the demands of historical accuracy. The medieval world, therefore, comes to have been evoked not in an attempt to faithfully recreate the period in the same way as the historian or literary critic would try to achieve, but instead they are seen through an ideological prism in order to serve a pretext. This pretext, put bluntly, is the way in which the medieval world is used; it is simply what the filmmaker wants the Middle Ages to be for the purposes of his or her story.

Pretextual Medieval Worlds

In this last section, then, I want to examine the use, and frequently the abuse, of the Middle Ages as a pretext. This represents a third level of interpretation through which medieval films must be filtered, since not only must careful attention be paid to the level of the objects (the historicon), and the world constructed from them (the forum), but we must also recognise that these worlds are being viewed through the eyes of the present and not the past.

In *The Seventh Seal*, for example, the objects represent this first level, in that they are being used as appropriate images drawn from the Middle Ages in order to satisfy the accuracy of the material world. The second level is the creation of the world, which is arguably what Eco calls the 'barbaric, harsh medieval period' in which life was, to use Hobbes' famous dictum, "brutal, nasty and short". This is the brutal but beautiful image of the medieval world which Bergman has deduced from the paintings and mystery plays to which he was exposed at an early age, as well as the religious zeal

which he associated with the era (as seen in the witch-burning scene). Consequently, his film views the plague as a scourge of God, which in turn created a belief in the imminent demise of the world. Yet the third level, the pretext or use of the Middle Ages, is constructed by his understanding of the medieval world within his own context. When he sees the world living in the knowledge that a deadly force is everywhere, threatening entire communities with frightening randomness, a deadliness which makes no distinction between social class, which has no pity, an indiscriminate and wholly real threat of death, he understandably makes links between this feeling of helplessness and anxiety and his own fears in the late 1950s. The Nuclear threat and the shadow of the three-minute warning thus underpins and overshadows his very conception of the medieval period, and infuses his work with a sense of very real concern for the apocalyptic millenarianism of his own era. The film is about the Middle Ages, yes, but it is also and at the same time about his own time. As Lindley observes, the film time is in fact neither, but the "Nevernever-but-always-land of twentieth-century European high modernism. If we are in any historical period, it is less the 1340s of the plot premise than the sub-atomic early 1950s, with universal death looming out of the northern sky."[39]

A more disturbing turn of events can be seen in films like *Ivanhoe*, *Knights of the Round Table* or *The Black Knight*. While retaining events from Scott's original novel, the filming in 1952 reveals some of the same formal elements as other epics from the MGM stable, such as *Knights of the Round Table*, which reads retrospectively as a product of the nascent Red Scare operating in the background of the public consciousness during the era. Thus in the same way as *The Seventh Seal* would later reflect the paranoia of nuclear crises, making a medieval film in the context of Hollywood in the 1950s when Cold War propaganda was nearing its height can lead to honest, patriotic, Christian knights fighting for freedom against the dark forces of pagan spies infiltrating and challenging their way of life. Thus in *Knights of the Round Table*, *The Black Shield of Falworth*, *The Vikings* and most notably in *The Black Knight* the material world is completely ignored, and the American accents—elsewhere conceived as an inaccuracy—are in fact heightened to emphasise its patriotic American values. We come face to face with the courts of kings which are all representative institutions of distinctly American dreams—and by extension they fighting against 'un-American activities'.[40]

And, lest we become too enthusiastic about condemning the past for its inability to separate history from the present, and that we would no longer dream of such brazen propaganda, we must remember that a similar process is happening today, too, the only difference being that perhaps it is

too early to see it. We can already see hints of this manipulation of the past when we examine Ridley Scott's 2005 *Kingdom of Heaven*, in which cultural attitudes to the ongoing Middle Eastern crisis, not to mention the influence of post-colonial theories on representations of the Crusades, cause the film to take a distinctly, and noticeably, modern take on the attack on Jerusalem. The attribution of blame to a few determined men acts in some sense as an expiation of contemporary cultural guilt, and causes the film to attack on two levels simultaneously, relating as much to the past as itdoes to the present.

Once again, and still more recently, this "pretextual" third level is revealed in the current BBC series of *Robin Hood* (beginning 2005), where we find a consciously updated Robin legend in the throes of dealing both with his mythical past (and hence the liberties taken with the 'source material') and with contemporary concerns. This finds its manifestation again in a general disapproval of War in the Middle East, together with a multicultural grouping which champions the oppressed underdog with diplomatic aplomb. To remove any doubt on the ideology through which this troubling period of our medieval past is being re-addressed, when Keith Allen's Sheriff of Nottingham introduces stricter security measures in Nottingham, they are justified by the rationale that the Crusades are, and I quote, "a War on Terror".[41]

Thus this third level, the use and pretext of a medieval world, works on the persistent link between the present and the past, and indeed the conflation of the temporal planes which is ineluctable when talking about our past, a conflation which Vivian Sobchack attributes to the 'Persistence of History'.[42] This is not, however, necessarily a criticism of the process, but perhaps is in some ways unintentional. For *Ivanhoe* especially, the epic film is not intended to appeal not to a medieval specialist, but to a popular audience, who are looking for very different things from a film. These audiences, while shrewd and not for these reasons to be patronised, are in the main willing to accept both the material world and the general inception of the medieval world on the condition that the diegesis is not shattered by an unbelievable event. "despite their mythic overtones and romance coloring [sic], films with medieval themes, like medieval histories, are required by their audiences to deliver a convincing picture of life".[43] To make this world a convincing picture, then, it must be continuously authentic, and to be authentic it is less important that it adheres to the material objects at the level of the historicon, but demands rather that people behave in a logical way. What is more, we must remember that this logic is the logic of the present time and not of the past, which does seem to suggest that, technically speaking, "by definition the entire film is an anachronism".[44]

And so we return to the point raised above, about degrees of accuracy, and authenticity. If we accept the propositions I have put forward, then we are able to tentatively propose a way of accessing medieval films—or more importantly a means to go about evaluating them—by assessing first what exactly we are criticising. In this way, we can take a film like *Kingdom of Heaven*, and rather than dismiss it as a 'bad' or 'good' medieval film, we are able to first ask whether there are any inaccuracies on the first level, in the material world, before accepting or rejecting the medieval forum proposed to us by Ridley Scott. Our concern, we may discover, might be simply that they are misusing the medieval world to make a point about the present day, in which case we realise that we are not, in fact criticising the historical impulse (to use Marc Ferro's terminology), but rather the use made of the historical details.[45] This is very different. It is not *inaccurate*, but *inauthentic*. When we see two different historical worlds existing alongside one another—as we did with *Ivanhoe* and *The Seventh Seal*—we can therefore avoiding asking the impossible question of "whose interpretation is correct" or accurate, or authentic, but rather begin to question why the filmmaker has imagined their world *in this way* rather than according to an alternative interpretation.

In conclusion, then, we might profitably turn to the assertion by David Williams that, in examining a representation of the medieval period, "it is less a question of asking 'is it authentic?' than 'what does my Middle Ages look like?'"[46] The inquiry into, and interpretation of, medieval literature and history yields such highly contradictory, intriguing and mysterious results that even amongst themselves, there is wide scope for scholarly debate. It is a debate to which the cinematic incarnations of the Middle Ages have much to contribute, but we must be clear about what exactly those contributions are to be. This debate must not be allowed to descend to a squabble over the inaccuracies on the level of the material world—although I am by no means denying that this degree of accuracy is important. What is more useful is to separate out the details of the world which surrounds the medieval film, and to criticise this forum in which the filmmaker has situated a hypothetical Middle Ages. We must also recognise the link between the histories being retold and the climate of its retelling, for the use of a medieval world has potentially much to reveal about the status of neo-medievalism in the modern world. When, for instance, *The Hour of the Pig* opens with the claim that the Medieval World was "mired in ignorance and superstition", we are able to recognise that the power of this statement comes not from an denigration of the Middle Ages themselves, but an attempt to recognise that we ourselves are mired in our own postmodern confusion about what the Medieval world really was.

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[1] Kevin J. Harty, *The Reel Middle Ages: American, Western and Eastern European, Middle Eastern, and Asian Films About Medieval Europe* (Jefferson: McFarland, 1999).

[2] As can be seen from the impressive attempt made by François Amy de la Bretèque, *L'Imaginaire médiéval dans le cinéma occidental* (Paris: Champion, 2004). Standing at well over 1,200 pages long, the author even so recognises that a good deal of the films remain undiscussed.

[3] This fidelity to 'the historical record' is discussed overtly by the film's historical consultant, a useful insight into the process of making an historical film. Natalie Zemon Davis, ""Any resemblance to persons living or dead": film and the challenge of authenticity", *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 8.3, (1988), 269-83.

[4] Here I am re-using Ranke's celebrated dictum (in *History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations*) which was in turn paraphrased in Rohmer's own description of the impossibility of recreating the era; see Nadja Tesich-Savage, "Rehearsing the Middle Ages", *Film Comment*, 14, (Sept-Oct 1978), 50-56:51-52.

[5] A. Keith Kelly, "Beyond Historical Accuracy: A Postmodern View of Movies and Medievalism", *Perspicuitas* (February 2004), accessible online at http://www.uni-due.de/perspicuitas/articles.shtml.

[6] Derek Elley, *The Epic Film: Myth and History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984)

[7] François Amy de la Bretèque, "Une 'figure obligée' du film de chevalerie: le Tournoi", *Cahiers de la Cinémathèque*, 42/43, Special edition, Le Moyen Âge au Cinéma (1985), 21-26.

[8] Michel Pastoureau, *Une Histoire Symbolique Du Moyen Age Occidental* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

[9] William F. Woods, "Authenticating Realism in Medieval Film", *The Medieval Hero on Screen: Representations from Beowulf to Buffy* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2004), pp. 38-51, p. 47.

[10] Comparing, for example, *Kingdom of Heaven*, *Ivanhoe*, *The Lion in Winter* and *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, would give us four entirely different views of the late twelfth century, irrespective of anachronisms and inaccuracy.

[11] In Hayden V. White, "Historiography and Historiophoty", *The American Historical Review*, 93, 5 (1988), 1193-1199; Marc Ferro, *Cinéma Et Histoire* (Paris: Denoël, 1977), especially Chapter Sixteen; Peter C. Rollins, *Hollywood As Historian: American Film in a Cultural Context* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1983). See also Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995), who devotes an entire section of his work to this very question.

[12] Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: History on Film* (NY & London: Routledge, 2007), p. 12

[13] Robert A. Rosenstone, "History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film", *The American Historical Review*, 93, 5 (1988), 1173-1185.

[14] Zemon Davis, "Any resemblance to persons living or dead", p. 277, although credit must also go to Nickolas Haydock, whose excellent article on medieval films makes explicit this fundamental rift between our ways of approaching the texts. See Nickolas Haydock, "Arthurian Melodrama, Chaucerian Spectacle, and the Waywardness of Cinematic Pastiche in *First Knight* and *A Knight's Tale*", *Film and Fiction: Reviewing the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: DS Brewer, 2003), pp. 5-38.

[15] Zemon Davis, "Any resemblance to persons living or dead", p. 271.

[16] Marnie Hughes-Warrington, History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 103-7, p. 104.

[17] The iconogrammes are medieval signs which « vont assez souvent par paires cumulatives ou antagonistes » ("often go together in cumulative of antagonistic pairings"). Amy de la Bretèque, *Imaginaire médiéval* , p. 1071 (translation my own). He further elaborates this pairing along the lines of a « motif » and a « thème », providing us with a degree of semiotic similarity with the 'two worlds' theory I am outlining here (personal correspondence, July 08).

[18] Zemon Davis, "Any resemblance to persons living or dead", p. 464, also quoted in Anthony Guneratre, "Cinehistory and the Puzzling Case of Martin Guerre", *Film and History*, 21, (Feb 1991), 2-19: 3.

[19] Robert Brent Toplin, *Perspectives*, 37.4, 4 (April 1999)unpaginated.

[20] Woods, "The Medieval Hero on Screen", , p. 47.

[21] Ibid., p. 47.

[22] Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 103-7.

[23] Mark E. Neely, Jr., "The Young Lincoln: Two Films", in *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*, ed. by Mark C. Carnes (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), pp. 124-27, p. 127.

[24] Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies*, p. 104.

[25] Cf the discussion of *The Patriot*, Ibid., p. 105.

[26] Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 168.

[27] William F. Woods, "Authenticating Realism in Medieval Film", *The Medieval Hero on Screen*, p. 39.

[28] David Williams, "Medieval Movies", *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 20, Special Number (1990), 1-32: 7-8.

[29] Norman N. Holland, ""The Seventh Seal": The Film as Iconography", *The Hudson Review*, 12, 2 (1959), 266-270: 268.

[30] Pastoureau, *Une Histoire Symbolique*, p. 335 (translation my own).

[31] As Jauss contends, "[t]he new text evokes for the reader the horizon of expectations and "rules of the game" familiar to him from earlier texts, which as such can then be varied, extended, corrected, but also transformed, crossed out, or simply reproduced." Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), p. 88.

[32] Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (London: Merlin, 1962), p. 61; Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Harlow: Longman/Pearson, 2006), p. 38.

[33] Marcus Bull, *Thinking Medieval: An Introduction to the Study of the Middle Ages* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 40.

[34] George Macdonald Fraser, *The Hollywood History of the World*, p. xv.

[35] "[p]uisque tout est historique, l'histoire sera ce que nous choisirons". Paul Veyne, *Comment on Écrit L'histoire* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1971), p. 42.

[36] Rosenstone, "History in Images/History in Words", p. 1185.

[37] Norman F. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages: The Lives- Works- and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1991), p. 37.

[38] Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980)p. ix.

[39] Arthur Lindley, "The Ahistoricism of Medieval Film", *Screening the Past*, 3 (May 1988)[n.p.].

[40] For a more in-depth reading of the 1950s epics along these lines see Rebecca A. Umland and Samuel J. Umland, *The Use of Arthurian Legend in Hollywood Film: From Connecticut Yankees to Fisher Kings* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), chapter four "The Arthurian Legend as Forms of Propaganda", pp. 105-28. See also Alan Lupack's impressive, "An Enemy in Our Midst: *The Black Knight* and the American Dream", in *Cinema Arthuriana: Essays on Arthurian Film*, ed. Kevin J. Harty (NY: Garland, 1991), pp. 29-40, and for a wider overview on the encoding of agendas within historical film, Kevin Harty's own essay, "Agenda Layered Upon Agenda: Anthony Mann's 1961 Film *El Cid*", in *Hollywood in the Holy Land: Essays on Film Depictions of the Crusades and Christian-Muslim Clashes*, ed. Nickolas Haydock and E.L. Risden (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), pp. 161-68.

[41] *Robin Hood*, BBC TV, Series 1, Episode 6.

[42] Vivian Sobchack, *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event* (London: Routledge, 1996).

[43] William F. Woods, "Authenticating Realism in Medieval Film", in Martha W. Driver and Sid Ray, *The Medieval Hero on Screen: Representations from Beowulf to Buffy* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2004), pp. 38-51, p. 39.

[44] Paden, "I Learned it at the Movies Teaching Medieval Film", *Postmodern Medievalisms* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), pp. 79-98, p. 92.

[45] Marc Ferro, *Cinema and History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), p. 163.

[46] Williams, "Medieval Movies", p. 3.