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Screening Early Europe: Premodern Projections

By Louise D'Arcens

The study of screen representations of early Europe is a growing area that has come in recent years to occupy a vital place within the various disciplines of early European studies, especially in medieval studies and, to a lesser degree, in Classics and early modern studies. From encyclopaedias of medievalist films such as Kevin J. Harty's *The Reel Middle Ages* (1999) and such other punningly-titled studies as *Knight at the Movies* (John Aberth, 2003), through to studies of medieval heroism on screen (Harty's *Cinema Arthuriana*, 2002, Driver and Ray's *The Medieval Hero on Screen*, 2004), and recent enquiries into the ideological and epistemological complexities of representing the European past (Ramey and Pugh's *Race, Class, and Gender in "Medieval" Cinema*, 2007, Haydock's *Movie Medievalism*, 2008), this is an undoubted growth area that has gained in nuance and sophistication as it has gathered momentum.[1] Despite its vibrancy and interdisciplinary potential, however, one of the central drawbacks of much current work on cinematic treatments of early Europe is that its insights are directed squarely back into the enclave of the historical disciplines, where it is read primarily by historians and literary scholars. This issue of *Screening the Past* aims to move beyond this enclave by bringing the work of Early Europeanists, particularly medievalists, into a new dialogue with the field of screen studies and the emerging area of film-philosophy, reaching out to audiences with a primary interest and expertise in screen studies. It is vital that we as scholars of the 'early European screen' come, as our field matures, to treat the nuances of screen study with as much care as we bring to our analysis of historical representation, and that we submit our ideas to the responses and judgements of our colleagues in the screen study disciplines as well as our own immediate colleagues.

Many beyond the discipline of medieval studies are familiar with Umberto Eco's landmark commentary in *Travels in Hyperreality* on "The return of the middle ages' within contemporary popular culture, where Eco explores the simulacral "fantastic past[s]" created particularly (though not exclusively) for the consumption of the American public, and formulates his famous taxonomy of 'the ten little Ages' that are recreated in our contemporary dream of this era.[2] Eco's account of postmodern medievalist revisitation has also been highly influential on — indeed, some would say overly determining of — the branch within medieval studies devoted to analysing the post-medieval interpretations of the Middle Ages. But as more work is produced in this area, Eco's early formulations are increasingly regarded as a watershed but not a horizon for how we can think about the remarkably tenacious substratum of medievalism in contemporary culture. While the 'return' described by Eco and others is evident in a wide range of popular and material cultural forms, from computer gaming and fantasy fiction through to heritage tourism, the contention that underwrites this collection of essays is that cinema (and to a lesser extent television) has remained the most aesthetically exciting and ideologically powerful medium for expressing the contemporary fascination with, and reinvention of, this period. Looking at both European and Hollywood cinematic history, this issue of *Screening the Past* aims to explore some moments in the intriguing but rather neglected story of cinema's long-term love affair with the Early European past.

The contributors to this volume hail from a range of disciplines. The majority are medievalists, although interests and specialities range from medieval music through to history, architecture, and literatures. Others come from early modern studies, performance studies, film studies, and philosophy. Their voices are, unsurprisingly, far from unanimous on such questions as screen culture's 'responsibility' to historical accuracy and verisimilitude, the aesthetics of historical representations, and the ideological stakes involved in returning to Early Europe as a mode of engagement with the present. They are united, however, in their conviction that we can learn much about the preoccupations of modernity and postmodernity by investigating the screen exploration of the early European past – indeed much more that we can ever learn about the European past itself.

Similarly, as the phrase 'Early Europe' suggests, the time span covered here is broad, ranging from the Hellenic period (Zack Snyder's *300*) through to the early stages of European contact with the New World (Terrence Malick's *The New World*), with a lengthy sojourn in the Middle Ages, exploring a number of its many screen iterations (Anglo-Saxon, Arthurian, Chaucerian, Crusading, Gothic, even Samurai), as well as a visit to the Florence of the Medici. This crossing of historical eras in these essays, and the many large chronological gaps within and between them, as well as the moments where they overlap, all respond to and reflect the dominant idioms of screen representations of the Early European past, which are intrinsically hybrid. Whether this hybridity is achieved unconsciously, blithely, or reflexively, it is a hallmark of screen representations of this era. Tropes signifying the non-specific 'heroic past' appear as readily in films set in classical Greece as in Arthurian films; stained-glass windows and gothic architecture signify as pan-medieval; Wagner's music has acquired 'honorary medieval' status, so closely is it associated with medieval legend. Even the New World of

European/non-European contact becomes, in cinematic terms, an Old World of myth, ritual and superstition; the deserts of outback Australia acquire an unmistakably gothic darkness; and gangsters and Florentine dukes become indistinguishable. The broad historical scope of this collection of essays affords but a glimpse of the seemingly limitless hybridity of early European screen representations.

A number of the essays here are concerned with the ideological implications of revisiting Early Europe onscreen. From the vexed question of how to translate the gender and rank dynamics of medieval culture for contemporary audiences (especially when they are children) to that of whether it is possible, or desirable, to engage sympathetically with the world-view of early colonists, readers are invited to ponder what it means, ideologically, when screen representations undertake to 'rehabilitate' an era whose social structures and cultural values were seemingly so foreign, even repugnant, to our own. The uncomfortable matter of medieval Christian religiosity also arises: can the beauty of medieval ecclesiastical spaces and structures only be celebrated cinematically by divorcing them from the religion they themselves celebrated? Elsewhere, the concrete effects of heavily ideological representations of this era are explored: whether it is the cinematic use of the early European past to foster support for the Iraq War, or the creation of ethnically offensive stereotypes in historical docudrama, it is clear that there are sometimes high stakes involved in how film and television 'does' early Europe.

Other essays in this issue are more concerned with epistemological questions, with a particular concern for how, specifically, screen media can make the past 'known' to us. Some of these essays approach this question theoretically, exploring the use of oneiric, imaginative, mythic and realist dimensions of screen representation itself, and looking at the impulses — nostalgic, romantic, satiric, aesthetic, even spiritual — that underpin, and shape, the very desire to 'film' the medieval past. Others are more concerned with the use, especially in recent texts, of screen technologies such as animation to recreate, and to imagine, early Europe. Whether it is the cartoon effect used in children's television, or the greater verisimilitude of computer-generated battle scenes, monsters, and mead-halls, animation creates a powerful effect of immediate contact with vanished worlds. This fascination with ways of seeing the early European past is matched by other essays' interest in how the past is signified aurally in cinematic representation. From discussing the use of Wagner to evoke wonder, nostalgic longing, or nationalistic identification with the past, to the meanings of medieval metal, keening women, Bach in the cathedral, and singing Arthurians, there is an insistence throughout these essays on the importance of screen music for signifying premodern and early modern pastness.

Lastly, these essays range across the spectrum of high culture to mass entertainment, travelling from post-Wagnerian art installations and auteurist cinema through to kids' Arthurian slapstick, via a cinematic gallery of dazzling stained glass windows. Some essays argue for the power, albeit problematic, of popular genre cinema as a vehicle for mythic representations of the past; others offer a spirited defense of progressive art cinema as offering more aesthetically ambitious and epistemologically knowing ways of exploring the medieval past. But there is a shared sense, on the whole, that it is vital to examine popular and less accessible forms alongside one another, in order to understand comparatively how their intended audiences influenced their codes of representation, and even which past they represented, and to what end. Looking at divergent forms together, finally, discloses the profoundly plastic nature of the past in the hands of screen practitioners, and its often unnoticed ubiquity on our screens, if we take the time to look.

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Endnotes

[1] See Kevin J. Harty, *The Reel Middle Ages: American, Western and Eastern European, Middle Eastern and Asian Films About Medieval Europe* (London: McFarland, 1999); John Aberth, *Knight at the Movies: Medieval History on Film* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003); Kevin J. Harty, *Cinema Arthuriana: Twenty Essays*, rev. ed. (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Co., 2002); Martha W. Driver and Sid Ray, eds., *The Medieval Hero on Screen: Representations from* Beowulf *to* Buffy (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Co., 2004); Lynn T. Ramey and Tyson Pugh, *Race, Class, and Gender in "Medieval" Cinema* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007); and Nickolas Haydock, *Movie Medievalism: The Imaginary Middle Ages* (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Co., 2008)

[2] Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1986), p. 47.

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