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Living memory and the long dead: the ethics of laughing at the Middle Ages

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Abstract
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Living Memory and the Long Dead: The Ethics of Laughing at the Middle Ages

Is there an ethics particular to laughing at the Middle Ages? What are the stakes of making the medieval past an object of postmedieval humour, and can the long dead of the Middle Ages laugh back at modernity?

A focus on the ethics of humour as an instrument of social tolerance or exclusion has gained momentum over the past two decades, with an increased analysis of how globalisation and multiculturalism have brought different ethnic, cultural, and religious communities into daily proximity with one another.¹ Because of the emergence of bigoted humour out of ideologies of ethnic hatred, misogyny, and homophobia, and because of what humour theorist Ken Willis calls its ‘consequences ... within living memory’,² laughter is regarded as a practice with direct and often urgent ramifications for the present and the future. The scholarly location of humour in the domains of the present and the social appeals to the ethical injunction against ridiculing the experience of others and the commitment to the social inclusion of persecuted peoples. In their attempts to identify the line between humour and offense, humour scholars have been concerned with the social dynamics between the subject (or ‘teller’) of the comic text, its object, and its audience, as well as with assessing the aptness of the so-called ‘superiority’ and ‘relief’ theories, in which humour either has the effect of establishing the laughing group’s superiority over the laughed-at group via ridicule, or conversely, performs the more benign function of diffusing social tension by channelling and hence warding off fear of the laughed-at group.³ Whether laughter is perceived, then, as what Terrence Des Pres has described as a tonal transgression that offers an obliquely satiric

avenue into understanding intolerance,⁴ or, conversely, as what Gerald Peary sees as a cavalier trivialisation of the suffering of others,⁵ there is a shared assumption that the exercise of humour is an ethical behaviour that can either foster or undermine progress toward a socially inclusive world.

But because this scholarship addresses itself to analysing the role of humour in establishing relationships, and especially hierarchies, between contemporaneous or cohabiting groups, the theorising of historicist humour – laughing at the past as ‘other’ to the modern, rather than as part of ‘living memory’ – is virtually absent from the scholarship. Not even the widely-held belief that humour is a vehicle for the perpetuation or undermining of axiomatic social values which, as Lockyer and Pickering argue, ‘trail a legacy of meanings and associations that extend a good way back into the past’,⁶ has led to the analysis of the social values implicit within comic representations of the past, despite the significance of these representations to reinforcing or challenging a whole range of ideological truisms. Recently, a single book has appeared on this topic, Hannu Salmi’s helpful Historical Comedy on Screen (2011). Although it has emerged from film studies, it extends the theoretical ambit of humour scholarship via its exploration of how ‘the register of comedic narration provides alternative ways of perceiving the past and of shaping [...] spectators’ relationship with history’.⁷ Some medievalist cinema features in Marcia Landy’s contribution to this volume — almost inevitably, Monty Python and the Holy Grail, but also Mario Monicelli’s two Brancaleone films, which I will also go on to discuss — but these are not analysed qua the specific question of comic perceptions of the Middle Ages, but under the more general rubric of comic historicism. This brief essay, then, will begin to address this oversight. Using

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⁶ Beyond a Joke, p.8
⁷ Hannu Salmi, Historical Comedy on Screen (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2011), p.29.
Monicelli’s medievalist comedies as my example, I will explore the complex dynamics of what it means to laugh specifically at the medieval past. I will show that although representations of the Middle Ages in comic texts are shaped primarily by the ambition to amuse audiences, this ambition is granted particular license by the distance between the medieval past and the present, and the long, diverse (and hence liberating) tradition of interpretation that has developed in the intervening centuries. Nevertheless, while this might encourage the impression that comic reworkings of medieval history are fundamentally ‘low stakes’, in fact the ethical stakes of comic historical interpretation for the present can still be both immediate and high.

Monicelli’s *L’armata Brancaleone* (Brancaleone’s Army, 1966) and its sequel *Brancaleone alla Crociate* (Brancaleone at the Crusades, 1970), are a pair of films deserving of more scholarly attention from medievalists than they have so far received. As the two major historical films in the *commedia all’italiana* cinematic movement of the 1960s and 70s that Monicelli was instrumental in shaping, the *Brancaleone* films are picaresque tales that trace the outlandish exploits of an impoverished knight-errant, Brancaleone di Norcia (played in declamatory mock-heroic mode by Vittorio Gassman), and his small, scruffy ‘army’ of misfits, which includes in the first film various brigands and vagrants, an orphan boy, a tiny wizened Jew, and a Byzantine bastard son, and in the second film a blind man, a cripple, a dwarf, a leper (later revealed to be a fugitive princess), a masochistic penitent, a baby, and a witch. Under Brancaleone’s blustering, chaotic leadership they embark on a range of adventures that includes falsely (and unsuccessfully) claiming a patrimony bequeathed in a stolen document, following a religious zealot, unsuccessfully attempting to collect ransom for a sham hostage, visiting hermits and stylites, settling the quarrel between Pope Gregory VII and Clement III, going to the Holy Land, and getting into shambolic fights along the way.
Together these elements present a risible Middle Ages, characterised by irrational piety, religious intolerance, buffoonish heroics, and barbarity.

Lest this seem like simple ridicule, the tenor the films’ comic medievalism is more complex. Lorenzo Codelli notes that among Monicelli’s primary influences were literary texts, in particular Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. This inheritance is not just evident in the films’ comically debased, picaresque version of a knight-errant narrative, although it is impossible to watch Brancaleone’s constant falls, buffets, and gaffes, or view his piecemeal armour, without thinking of Don Quixote in his rusty ensemble and paste-board travesty of a helmet. Rather, what is most intangibly but strikingly Cervantean about Monicelli’s films are their satiric-parodic register, which modulates in a similarly nuanced way to Cervantes’ novel between laughing *at* and laughing *with* the Middle Ages, and between ridicule and sympathy for their hero, who, as a pitch-perfect burlesque of the romance hero, moves the audience to derision, amusement, and tenderness in equal measures. Moreover, Monicelli’s narrative, while robustly executed, has a finely calibrated emotional structure: just when Brancaleone’s stentorian pronouncements on chivalrous conduct threaten to become too absurd, or his exposure of his companions to danger reveals chivalry’s violent and delusional underbelly, he either scores a victory or extends kindness to a vulnerable outcast, which restores his innate nobility … until the next mishap.

The film also offers a deeply sympathetic portrayal of a cast of misfits, and as such has attracted praise for its presentation of ‘history from the point of view of the humble people, the little guy’. Although larger historical events find their way into the films – the crusades and papal rivalry are two conspicuous ones – their significance plays out on the minor stage of the characters’ smaller lives. Codelli, and Marcia Landy and Tommaso di Carpegna

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Falconieri after him, have identified this tendency as a counter-historical strategy in Monicelli’s work.\(^9\) What this reveals — and here the ethical stakes of his historical representations become apparent — is that the satiric target of the *Brancaleone* films is not the Middle Ages per se, but first and foremost what Monicelli saw as the apologetic way in which the medieval period has been depicted in contemporary culture and the purposes such depictions have served. He nominated the immaculate look of the Hollywood Middle Ages as his first *bête noire*; the apparently haphazard structure of the *Brancaleone* films, as well as their earthy palette and the realism of the their hot and dusty mise-en-scènes, are a clear riposte to the Technicolor Middle Ages of Michael Curtiz and William Keighley’s 1938 *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and its ilk. But Monicelli’s critique also extends beyond cinema, taking aim at what he saw as Italian academics’ airbrushed, ‘glossy vision’ (*visione patinata*) of the medieval period as refined and highly civilized. Rejecting the self-congratulatory nationalistic, ethnocentric, and Christocentric implications of this vision, he replaces it with an Italian Middle Ages that is hierarchical, barbaric, and xenophobic (internally and externally):

The Middle Age was the low point in European history [...] Civilization, truth, and science were on the other side: the side of Islam. That's what the Crusades were all about. We went to occupy places where they were more civilized. Of course, we were repulsed. I wanted to show this was the real Middle Ages in Italy - barbaric and uncivilized, savage, grotesque.\(^10\)

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Interestingly, Monicelli’s comically grotesque vision led to him being invited to debate with professors in Italian university fora. His self-defence in these contexts offers an intriguing snapshot into the ethical complexity of comic medievalism’s negotiation of history, politics, and humour. First, he argued that the Middle Ages of his *Brancaleone* films was, for all its buffoonery, ‘completely true’; second, he claimed its satirical dimension reflected his socialist convictions, in particular his critique of hegemonic and authoritarian structures both past and present; and thirdly, he introduced comedy as a defence of the film’s ‘exaggerations’, arguing that the ‘funny, comic film’, he wanted to make would not be possible with a decorous Middle Ages.\(^{11}\) The realist impulse underpinning Monicelli’s comic position is evident in his use of framing techniques characteristic of Italian neo-realism, in which middle-distance shots embed bodies in their environments, creating a mise-en-scène that encompasses the characters’ life-world. Using a historical realist technique also evident in Roberto Rosselini’s 1950 depiction of the medieval Franciscans in *Francesco, giullare di Dio*, Monicelli frequently frames Brancaleone and his band within the European and Palestinian landscapes through which they pass, using only a limited number of the kind of close-up shots that privilege individual psychology over social-historical subjectivity. To say, however, that the *Brancaleone* films simply replace fantasy with social realism would be simplistic. This is especially true of their visual and aural aesthetic, in which brooding, empty landscapes and deserted towns, again inherited from Italian neorealism, give way to surreal, almost futurist interiors inhabited by a range of cameo characters (often women) in operatically camp costumes designed by Piero Gherardi, costume and design director on a number of Federico Fellini’s films. While these stylized environments seem removed from the mimetic Middle Ages outside, in another way they crystallise the film’s ‘medievalness’.

\(^{11}\) Young, ‘Poverty, Misery, War’ p.39.
The scene in an Italo-Byzantine palace, for instance, where Brancaleone finds himself being whipped by the sexually frenzied, and very ’60s-looking, Lady Theodora (played by cult horror actress Barbara Steele), is both anachronistic and essentially medieval according to the film’s vision of a world in which cruelty, pain, and sacrifice become a perverse form of pleasure. The use, for the dialogue, of a pseudo-archaic, macaronic Italo-Latin of Monicelli’s own devising (he says he ‘invented an Italian that didn't exist’) is in keeping with the films’ overall comic strategy of offering ‘uno parodia molto vera’, that is a meta-parody in which medieval chivalry and medievalist representation are lampooned by depicting a Middle Ages that is manifestly not real, but nevertheless aims to be ‘true’ in the moral and ideological satire it offers. Monicelli reused this language in his 1984 comedy *Bertoldo, Bertoldino e Cacasenno*, set in ninth-century Veneto. This approach to satiric and parodic truth licenses the creation of a condensed medieval world in which the First Crusade and the Black Death co-exist as temporal indexes of a past epitomized by war and disease.

The question of the significance of the *Brancaleone* films’ comic medievalist vision to ‘living memory’ emerges directly in Landy’s argument that they are social satires which ‘explore affinities with contemporary cultural and political life’. While Monicelli has denied that the film satirizes contemporary Italy, elsewhere he has admitted that the film’s anarchic bottom-up approach to portraying the Middle Ages, which is a clear indictment of modern Italy’s self-serving vision of the medieval past, corresponds with the socialist perspective that abides across his oeuvre. His displaced satire of the delusional violence of Italian Fascism, for instance, is subtly present in Brancaleone’s occasional maniacal outbursts in which he insists he is ‘il Duce’ of his band. Characters who have power or authority are presented variously as mercurial, cruel, exploitative, and arrogant, while

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12 Marcia Landy, ‘Comedy and Counter-History’, in *Historical Comedy on Screen*, pp.177-198 (p. 181).
warmth and compassion are the preserve of the film’s pariah figures, including the Satanist witch Tiburzia, who ultimately sacrifices herself to Death to save Brancaleone. In his satiric critique, Monicelli can be situated not only within *commedia all’italiana* but also within a fertile culture of comic medievalism emerging out of the Italian Left in the late 1960s and 70s, that also included filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini (*The Hawks and the Sparrows, The Decameron, The Canterbury Tales*) and playwright and performer Dario Fo (*Mistero Buffo/The Comic Mysteries*).\(^{13}\)

The medieval Church fares the worst in the films’ satire of power, being presented as a chief perpetrator of aggression and intolerance. The representation of the Crusades as a pointless, chaotic, and grotesque chapter in religious history is perhaps the most obvious instance of this, but it is far from the only one: the deranged quest for power is common to cult leaders and popes alike. The modality of the films’ satire is largely comic compression; according to Monicelli, ‘it was easy to find farcical situations’ (situazione farsese) in medieval Catholic history,\(^{14}\) and so disparate historical details, such as competing claimants to the papacy, early Christian asceticism, and trials of faith are condensed into absurd ‘pan-medieval’ scenes such as the papal face-off in *Brancaleone alla Crociate* where the dispute between the two would-be popes is resolved by Brancaleone being forced to walk across hot embers by a stylite who adjudicates the outcome from his pillar. Elsewhere, the tone is bleak and haunting. Arguably the films’ most moving episode is one in *Brancaleone alla Crociate* titled ‘The Ballad of Intolerance’, in which the itinerant band comes across a tree from whose branches dangle dozens of lynched bodies. When Tiburzia, who has the power to speak with hanged people,


asks them how they got there, the disembodied voice of one corpse replies that the village priests and dignitaries rounded them up and killed them for their sins. These ‘sins’ are mostly trifling and non-violent, ranging from an interest in astronomy to eating salami on a Friday, and even, in the case of one figure, simply being a Jew.

Several speeches in this scene contradict Monicelli’s claim that his films are not satirising modern Italy, so its stark image of medieval atrocity resonates powerfully, despite the historical distance, with the enormities of the twentieth century, in particular anti-Semitism in twentieth-century Italy. When the band first see the tree in the distance, they mistake the corpses for ‘strange fruit’, a phrase immediately evocative of the doleful song made famous by Billie Holliday about the lynching of African Americans in the modern South. Later, after we learn of the innocent Jew’s execution, the voice of another body, claiming to ‘see afar’ into time, says ‘[t]ravellers, be glad, the world will not forever be intolerant’, and offers a sanguine future vision of peace and equality that can only be taken as chillingly ironic in light of the monstrous intolerance of twentieth-century European history, and, more locally, the turbulence of Italy in 1970. The progressivist myth of modern civility is further crushed, this time without irony, when the unsettling voice of an especially ghoulish corpse utters an opposing prophesy: ‘you will be as we are’. In a perfect example of the technique Michel Chion has dubbed *voix acousmatique*, in which cinematic voice is freed from a specific speaking subject, projecting beyond the ‘world’ of the cinematic text, the film’s use of voiceover for the corpses’ speeches in this scene means that their voices float beyond the diegesis, addressing not just the band but the audience’s living memory of atrocity, and, in Italy, its current experience of official violence and summary justice. Exploring the ideological force of Chion’s notion, Slavoj Žižek emphasises the cross-historical nature of the

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15 *Brancaleone alla Crociate*, dir. by Mario Monicelli (Fair Film, O.N.C.I.C., 1970).
acousmatic voice’s address, that by ‘not locating the phenomenon [the source of the voice] in its historical totality’ it instead speaks directly to the audience, compelling them to experience ‘a material presence which escapes historical mediation.’ In Monicelli’s scene, the comic Middle Ages (although this is a dark scene in a lighter film) speaks obliquely but unmistakably to the present.

The *Brancaleone* films, then, showcase but do not resolve the twin ethical and representational dilemmas of serving the three masters of history, politics, and comedy. What they do demonstrate, however, is that comic medievalism uses amusement to trace an oblique but revealing path into the major moral, ethical, and political problems of modernity. Many of these are ripe for ridicule; others are no laughing matter.

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