

THE NEW MIDDLE AGES

RACE, CLASS,
and GENDER *in*
"MEDIEVAL"
CINEMA

Edited by
Lynn T. Ramey and Tison Pugh



THE NEW MIDDLE AGES

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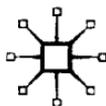
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INTRODUCTION: FILMING THE “OTHER” MIDDLE AGES

Tison Pugh and Lynn T. Ramey

For over a century, filmmakers have struggled with representing societies, both past and present, on the screen. From the outset, with Georges Méliès’s Joan of Arc films in the late nineteenth century, the Middle Ages has served as a preferred setting for exploring on the silver screen some of society’s deepest concerns.¹ But the marriage of film and history is frequently somewhat inharmonious because, as Vivian Sobchack observes, combining modern cinema with historical narratives confuses the very meaning of history: “In great part, the effects of our new technologies of representation put us at a loss to fix that ‘thing’ we used to think of as History or to create clearly delineated and categorical temporal and spatial frames around what we used to think of as the ‘historical event.’ ”² Thus, when cinema meets history, the very meaning of “history” appears to crumble under the pressures to translate the truth of the past into the media of the present.

Beyond the critical problems in uniting history and film, directors often deploy history—including the events and narratives of the Middle Ages—to advance their own contemporary artistic and political visions. By addressing critical issues confronting modern-day societies through the mythic and legendary past of the Middle Ages, “medieval” films further confound the difficulties of depicting history on the screen. The very phrase “medieval cinema” encapsulates this problem, as the term seems to denote films created during the Middle Ages, a patently obvious technological impossibility. Medieval cinema suggests a virtually oxymoronic generic classification, and one of the chief points of the chapters in this volume is to confront that incongruity, acknowledging that even when it is granted that medieval cinema refers to modern films depicting the Middle Ages, the possibility of paradox inheres in that few scholars would recognize the ostensibly medieval qualities of a given film as truly medieval, as successfully depicting the contours of medieval narrative and history.

Recent scholarship within medieval studies, growing out of the New Historicist readings of the last quarter century, has focused on the particular and moved away from the totalizing histories that labeled the European Middle Ages as feudal, Christian, and chivalric. In an uneasy relationship between historicization and alienation, medieval studies mediates between a sense of insurmountable estrangement and a desire to understand the past through archival and archaeological research. Norris Lacy characterizes his work on Arthurian documentary as an attempt to bridge past and present:

In my case, I have continued to offer unremunerated advice and, in two instances, to consent to be interviewed because I continue to hope that one of these films, one of these days, will turn out to be a superlative presentation—engaging yet authoritative, thoughtful, and correct—of the Arthurian legend. In other words, I hope a film will eventually get it right.³

We join Lacy in his disappointed desire for a film—any film—to “get it right.” But rather than patiently passing time until a chimerical vision of cinematic authenticity comes along—as we collectively metamorphose into the scholarly incarnations of Estragon and Vladimir waiting for a cinematic Godot—we argue that much can be gleaned from films that “get it all wrong,” especially since most of the films evince little or no interest in getting the Middle Ages “right.” Surely any work of literary or cinematic art must in some manner be evaluated according to the terms established for it, and if medieval cinema as a genre evinces little interest in historical accuracy by recklessly embracing anachronism, should critics not then respond with due awareness of the hermeneutic structures these texts create?

While the Middle Ages can be used as a setting to achieve differing goals, the films addressed in this volume employ medieval themes as a pretext in which directors demonstrate “no real interest in the historical background; the Middle Ages are taken as a sort of mythological stage on which to place contemporary characters,” as Umberto Eco describes the ways in which the Middle Ages are artistically mediated in postmodern culture.⁴ When present-day figures act on the medieval stage, tensions are inevitably produced as postmodern tales of individuality and agency conflict with the received wisdom of the Middle Ages as a time of monolithic institutions and hegemonies. Viewing these films within the hermeneutical space of Eco’s pretext, it becomes apparent that the Middle Ages are used for purposes other than medieval mimeticism.

In this manner, medieval films more accurately delineate postmodern concerns than any fidelity to medieval sources, reflecting the ways in which medieval studies is itself influenced by postmodern theory. Postmodern critical approaches to medieval culture attract the reader with the promise

that past situations are relevant to current problems, but critics must often draw short of delivering on their promises, citing or implying postmodern concerns with presentism, or projecting our own values on the past: a qualm not shared by the directors of most medieval films. For example, exciting work by medievalists on postmodern concepts of the relationship between colonizer and colonized has significantly impacted medieval studies, as recent books and essay collections attest.⁵ However, the postmodern focus on the particular inherently conflicts with any attempt to draw parallels between the Middle Ages and our own society, the clear concern for the directors of the films analyzed here. While medievalists are justified in understanding the Middle Ages on their own terms, the very use of the Middle Ages as pretext implies presentism, and only by exposing and examining presentism can these dynamics be understood. For this reason, the chapters in this book directly address the “big three” contemporary concerns that are most likely to provoke charges of presentism: race, class, and gender.

If for W.E.B. Dubois the central problem of the twentieth century was race⁶, questions of class and gender hold equal sway as we progress into the twenty-first century. When modern preoccupations with race, class, and gender are inserted into medieval films, a debate particularly pertinent to those who study the Middle Ages as an academic discipline is raised: what concepts of race, class, and gender did medieval people have, if any? To what extent should today’s films that raise these issues be held accountable to the actual historical situations that pertained in medieval societies? Medievalists energetically debate the degree to which modern notions of race, class, and gender existed in the Middle Ages. In regard to race, *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* hosted a series of articles on the topic in 2001, but the findings of the six essayists were counterbalanced by William Chester Jordan’s compelling plea to leave the question of race out of discussion of the Middle Ages altogether:

I have my doubts about the utility of “race” (an allegedly fixed category) as an analytic concept in the modern world. These doubts are compounded when “race” is applied to the Middle Ages. I cannot prove, but I do not believe that readers will sufficiently shed their modern notions of race simply because scholars redefine the concept against the modern grain.⁷

Medievalists studying the formation of ethnic identity should, according to this thinking, take into account both modern and medieval methods of defining self and Other. For instance, attitudes toward conversion indicate the ways in which racial and ethnic constructions could be—but were not always—remarkably fluid in the Middle Ages. If medieval Christians

indeed believed in the universal brotherhood of believers, conversion of a nonbeliever would wash away all difference, resulting in a person indistinguishable from “old” Christians, fully and permanently integrated in Christian society.⁸ For the modern era, in contrast, biological notions of racism constructed a person as “colored” on account of even a drop of non-white blood,⁹ and conversion did little to help European Jews in Nazi Germany, where a Jewish grandparent qualified one for extermination. Thus, when modern films incorporate ideas of multicultural racial acceptance or project racism into the medieval past, they not only “do not shed their modern notions of race,” as Jordan feared, but they often exploit this shared cultural capital to comment overtly on modern racial and ethnic conflict.

Not exempt from accusations of ahistoricity, historians of medieval social structures have increasingly found locating the emergence of a bourgeois or middle class to be contested ground.¹⁰ Medieval historians in the 1990s were witness to a groundbreaking debate about the use of “feudalism,” a term previously thought to differentiate the medieval past from our modern class system, to describe medieval social structures.¹¹ In the wake of the death of feudalism, the class question has reemerged, demanding that scholars attune themselves to the local particularities of a given time and place of the past. While medievalists generally hold that our economic basis for class structure was likely not identical to medieval notions of social distinction, most also agree that something akin to our middle class emerged at some point in the thousand years designated as medieval. Class structures remain one of the least explored territories of medieval life, though questions of literary audience do scratch the surface of what medieval communities enjoyed and consumed in their leisure time.¹²

In regard to gender, scholars are often skittish about using modern lexicons to describe medieval gender roles. Can one describe Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath* as a “feminist,” since such a word implies a modern conception of identity politics? Can we use the term “homosexual” to refer to same-sex attractions and sexualities in the Middle Ages?¹³ To look at one example, John Boswell’s pioneering work on medieval homosexuality—notably in *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* and *Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe*—raised heated debate in the national media, including a comment by Camille Paglia that Boswell’s work was “slippery, self-interested scholarship, where propaganda and casuistry impede the objective search for truth.”¹⁴ In discussing medieval gender and sexuality, scholars face the constant threat of solipsistic presentism. The struggle to bring a present-day understanding to a premodern text while simultaneously remaining sensitive to its unique cultural environment creates a balancing act that we face daily in our professional lives, but a challenge that is made both more and less difficult when we apply modern vocabularies to historical issues.

In films where some element of this triad of modern anxieties is central to the narrative, the director is likely to suffer condemnation for being unrealistic, inaccurate, or even ahistorical. To look briefly at two examples, *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) has been excoriated due to its “scarcely credible, comradely commingling” created by the Soviet ideology evident in Sergei Eisenstein’s film, thus muddying its depiction of class within the medieval world.¹⁵ Likewise, in Kevin Reynolds’s *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991), the combination of Robin’s egalitarian and multicultural “management style” generally breeds the sort of contempt among medieval historians epitomized by John Aberth’s dismissal of the film as merely “an excuse to push a modern, politically correct agenda, which includes multiculturalism and feminism.” Aberth finds that Morgan Freeman’s character Azeem strains credibility, as do the profeminist Maid Marian, the whiney, maladjusted Will Scarlett, and the “historically implausible” sheriff who tries to usurp noble authority.¹⁶ The criticism directed at these two markedly disparate films—one a pioneering work by one of world cinema’s greatest directors, the other a fairly typical Hollywood summer blockbuster—represents much of the scholarship addressing medieval film in their rejection of any attempt to use the Middle Ages as other than the subject of researched docudrama.

But narrative film is not documentary,¹⁷ and film directors often seek to create a Middle Ages that is sufficiently medieval to set the stage for the unfolding narrative yet nonetheless recognizably modern to its intended audience. In terms of creating the necessary semiotic system of the medieval, different directors rely on different methods, of course, but as Vivian Sobchack argues, the historicity of medieval film is often attested merely through the iconic deployment of “insistent dirt and squalor” that “comes to signify and fix the ‘real’ Middle Ages.”¹⁸ Sobchack’s argument discusses the means in which iconic shorthands create—and then fulfill—viewerly expectations of historical reality, but her analysis of how dirt and filth effectively construct the “truth” of the medieval past highlights the ways in which modern directors can create a medieval past plausible to their audiences with very little historical research.¹⁹ The Middle Ages thus frequently serves as a tabula rasa on which to project modern questions of identity, but if Sobchack is correct about the semiotic function of dirt in medieval film, the tabula rasa is nonetheless at least somewhat smudged. But this should not be surprising, as the Middle Ages serves as the temporal Other to modernity, and the human Other is likewise constructed as dirty and polluted by racist, classist, and sexist ideologies.²⁰ Ironically, then, some directors attempt to ameliorate current cultural tensions over race, class, and gender by re-Othering the Middle Ages. By distorting and dirtying the Middle Ages, a truth can nonetheless be told, even if it does not address the medieval era at all.

The medieval film genre is not, in general, concerned with constructing a historically accurate past, but much criticism of medieval film by medievalists nonetheless centers around highlighting anachronisms and inaccuracies. This volume aims to look differently at the popularity of medieval film to understand how the recreation of an often mythical past performs important cultural work for modern directors and viewers.²¹ By highlighting these tensions in the medieval film genre, we encourage deeper inquiry into the use of medieval settings in film. Rather than merely pointing out anachronistic inaccuracies in order to criticize the films, the essays in *Race, Class, and Gender in "Medieval" Cinema* demonstrate that directors intentionally insert modern preoccupations with race, class, and gender into a setting that would normally be considered incompatible with these concepts. The insertion of these concerns into medieval culture implies (perhaps incorrectly) that these categories serve eternal human interest, as the Middle Ages provides an imaginary space far enough removed from the present day to allow for critical analysis of race, class, and gender in today's society.

In considering the ways in which the Middle Ages is used to address modern concerns of race, class, and gender, three primary tropes seem to structure these cinematic discourses: the Middle Ages as lost ideal, as barbaric past, and as the site of timeless romantic values. We use these three concepts as the organizing principles of this volume.²² Thus, part 1 of our volume, *Multicultural Identities: A Lost Ideal?*, begins with four essays addressing the Middle Ages as a lost ideal of multicultural secular humanism and a space of boundless personal freedom and agency. In "Once, Present, and Future Kings: *Kingdom of Heaven* and the Multitemporality of Medieval Film," Arthur Lindley demonstrates through a reading of Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) that medieval films rarely construct a historically accurate—or even historicized—version of the Middle Ages. In fact, they more frequently hybridize time periods so that multiple historical periods interlace and interact to facilitate transhistorical "realities," thus constructing metacommentary on these time periods; such maneuverings are especially apparent in regard to *Kingdom of Heaven*'s depiction of multicultural equanimity amidst the Crusades. Don Hoffman, in "Chahine's *Destiny*: Prophetic Nostalgia and the Other Middle Ages," argues that Chahine's deployment of the philosopher Averroës allows the director to speak out against the past and present dangers of Islamic fundamentalism. John Ganim's "Reversing the Crusades: Hegemony, Orientalism, and Film Language in Youssef Chahine's *Saladin*" focuses on one of the few film versions of the Crusades to regard the Crusades through Arab eyes. *Saladin* serves as an answer to a range of popular Hollywood films featuring the Crusades, and Ganim explores these issues in relation to the always already

orientalization of the Middle Ages onscreen. Randy P. Schiff demonstrates in “Samurai on Shifting Ground: Negotiating the Medieval and the Modern in *Seven Samurai* and *Yojimbo*” that medieval films are often charged with a nostalgia that overrides a modern appreciation of socioeconomic complexity; director Akira Kurosawa, however, refuses to romanticize a class-stratified past, instead foregrounding liminal characters who reflect and participate in postwar Japan’s painful transition to a postmodern economic world order through their self-realization as heroic figures.

In contrast to the construction of the Middle Ages as a lost ideal, other films depict the period as one of rampant barbarism and cruelty as seen in part 2 of this volume, “Barbarism and the Medieval Other,” which comprises four chapters. In “Vikings through the Eyes of an Arab Ethnographer: Constructions of the Other in *The 13th Warrior*,” Lynn Shutters examines how the Middle Ages operates as a site of both identification with and alterity to our own contemporary culture through the conflicting masculinities of East and West. In this retelling of *Beowulf*, masculinities are forged both through cultural interchange and through the violent conquest of a mutually denigrated Other. Caroline Jewers’s “Mission Historical, or ‘[T]here were a hell of a lot of knights’: Ethnicity and Alterity in Jerry Bruckheimer’s *King Arthur*,” assesses the way that the film reencodes the past through a vision of King Arthur as a postcolonial subject in a country torn between Saxon and Roman forces—England. In “Inner-City Chivalry in Gil Junger’s *Black Knight: A South Central Yankee in King Leo’s Court*,” Laurie Finke and Martin Shichtman argue that the fantasy of the film draws upon the very real oppression of urban modernity in inner-city communities such as South Central Los Angeles; through the reconstructive powers of medieval knighthood, issues of postcolonial oppression are flimsily constructed as empowering constituents of self-empowerment. The final chapter of part 2, “Queering the Medieval Dead: History, Horror, and Masculinity in Sam Raimi’s *Evil Dead* Trilogy,” explores questions of gender, sexuality, and class played out among the demonic and the Arthurian. Tison Pugh observes that, over the course of Raimi’s trilogy, the protagonist Ash becomes more and more masculinized, in a modern American sense; in medieval England, however, he finds a different measure of manhood that serves to nuance his modern, somewhat limited notion of masculinity, and these changes are aligned with generic shifts that encode narrative forms with varying degrees of masculinity and violence.

The third part of this book, “Romantic Values,” addresses recreations of the medieval past as the site of timeless romantic values. In her essay “In Praise of Troubadourism: Creating Community in Occupied France, 1942–1943,” Lynn Ramey considers the ambiguous deployment of the medieval past in Marcel Carné’s *Les Visiteurs du soir* (1942) and Jean

Delannoy's *L'Éternel Retour* (1943). During World War II, French medievalist Edith Thomas coined the word "troubadourism" to lambaste the ways in which the past could be used to create a sentimental present. However, must troubadourism intrinsically be viewed negatively? Ramey recasts troubadourism as a powerful and enabling metaphor for how medieval films speak to the present through the creation of a landscape of timeless love. In "Sexing Warrior Women in China's Martial Arts World: King Hu's *A Touch of Zen*," Peter Lorge demonstrates that the female protagonist performs a female gender construction against the desexed poles of eunuchs and Buddhist monks, thus opening a clear path to Buddhist redemption. Romance is eschewed in the film, but the medieval past nonetheless offers a space to consider issues of female agency in relation to sexuality and gender roles. Angela Jane Weisl, in "The Hawk, the Wolf, and the Mouse: Tracing the Gendered Other in Richard Donner's *Ladyhawke*," demonstrates that the film creates a central core of destabilized gender identities that must finally be broken—like the curse that ensnares its animal protagonists—in order to return to the normative assumptions of contemporary romance. Holly Crocker's "Chaucer's Man Show: Anachronistic Authority in Brian Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale*" probes the film's collaborative construction of knightly masculinity that connects the construction of Chaucer's authorial identity with the fabrication of a persuasive model of the peasant protagonist's "knightly" manhood. Ultimately Chaucer enables yet is effaced in his efforts to help the young peasant-cum-knight win his fair lady's hand. In the final chapter of *Race, Class, and Gender in "Medieval" Cinema*, Lorraine Stock and Candace Gregory-Abbot's "The 'Other' Women of Sherwood: The Construction of Difference and Gender in Cinematic Treatments of the Robin Hood Legend" demonstrates that Robin Hood films consistently thematize the "Otherness" of women through their romantic relationships with Robin Hood and other men while reflecting the course of twentieth-century gender politics.

Despite the geographical variety of films—from Hollywood to China—and the striking variety of themes—from possessed Michigan college students in the *Evil Dead* trilogy to oppressed Japanese peasants in *Seven Samurai*—the essays of *Race, Class, and Gender in "Medieval" Cinema* share a common concern with exploring the ways in which the medieval past is deployed to reflect the present. As Adrienne Rich observes, "Every journey into the past is complicated by delusions, false memories, false namings of real events."²³ Rich is right to warn us of the propensity to find reconstructed falsehoods in our search through the past, but by combing through these falsehoods, we hope the the chapters of this volume will help us to discover some truths about our present.

Notes

1. An extant copy of Méliès's 1900 short film, and a fragment of an even earlier film on Joan by Georges Hatot, can be found at the Joan of Arc Center in New Orleans. For more clips and information on early adaptations of Joan's story, see the media and film section of the International Joan of Arc Society, <http://www.smu.edu/IJAS/index.html>.
2. Vivian Sobchack, ed., *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 5. See also Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996); and Marcia Landy, *Cinematic Uses of the Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
3. Norris J. Lacy, "The Documentary *Arthur*: Reflections of a Talking Head," *King Arthur in Popular Culture*, eds., Elizabeth Sklar and Donald Hoffman (London: McFarland, 2002), p. 84.
4. Umberto Eco, "The Return of the Middle Ages," *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), pp. 59–85, at p. 68.
5. Such studies include Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000); John M. Ganim, *Medievalism and Orientalism: Three Essays on Literature, Architecture and Cultural Identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Patricia Clare Ingham and Michelle R. Warren, eds., *Postcolonial Moves: Medieval through Modern* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); and Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams, eds., *Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages: Translating Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
6. W. E. B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903).
7. William Chester Jordan, "Why Race?" *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31.1 (2001): 165–73, at p. 169. The other chapters in this special issue include Thomas Hahn, "The Difference the Middle Ages Makes: Color and Race before the Modern World," pp. 1–37; Robert Bartlett, "Medieval and Modern Concepts of Race and Ethnicity," pp. 39–56; Dorothy Hoogland Verkerk, "Black Servant, Black Demon: Color Ideology in the Ashburnham Pentateuch," pp. 57–77; Sharon Kinoshita, "'Pagans Are Wrong and Christians Are Right': Alterity, Gender, and Nation in the *Chanson de Roland*," pp. 79–111; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "On Saracen Enjoyment: Some Fantasies of Race in Late Medieval France and England," pp. 113–46; and Linda Lomperis, "Medieval Travel Writing and the Question of Race," pp. 147–64.
8. For a summary of recent studies of the effects of conversion, see Jordan, "Why Race?" p. 166.
9. The State of Virginia's Racial Integrity Act of 1924 disallowed intermarriage of nonwhites and whites based on the one-drop classification.