

## Remaking the Middle Ages: The Methods of Cinema and History in Portraying the Medieval World

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**Reviewer:** Kevin Harty

The thesis and value of Andrew Elliott's new study of 'medieval film' are neatly encapsulated by his reminding us at the end of the book's preface that, in the medieval tradition, the Grail quest involved asking, not answering, the right questions. The importance of Elliott's book to this increasingly crowded field (happily, to nod to Langland, a fair field now more full of folk) lies in the author's penchant for asking the right questions over and over again as he seamlessly moves through areas of critical enquiry too often seen at odds with one another: literary theory, medieval studies, cinema studies, film theory, historiography, new historicism, medievalism, and cultural studies in general – while also acknowledging his need to address audiences of both specialists and non-specialists alike in all these fields.

Umberto Eco has, perhaps uncharacteristically simply, reminded us that 'people seem to like the Middle Ages' ([1](#)), while also warning us that there is no such thing as *the* Middle Ages. Rather, in Eco's view, there are at least ten at times distinct, at times overlapping notions of the Middle Ages, which multiple post-medieval worlds have both happily embraced and readily discarded as they saw fit. Elliott's study takes heed of Eco's warning, adopting in his book a series of 'medieval imaginaries' (a phrase coined by François Amy de la Bretèque as the title for his monumental 2004 study of 'medieval film') as the basis for his consistently insightful study.

Elliott begins by discussing history, historiography, and film – and the ‘one, big mess’ that post-medieval attempts to access the medieval have become. He then argues that historiography and cinematography share a common burden. They are not so much at odds with each other as attempting, one on page and one on film, to do the same thing: to re-imagine and to reconstruct some version(s) of what we call the medieval. Film does not, therefore, necessarily get medieval history, literature, or culture wrong. Rather, film, like the study of history itself, attempts to bridge a gap between two eras, our own and what we think of as the medieval, either by showing us that which we perceive iconically as medieval or by assimilating the medieval into ‘more recognizable and familiar models’. European film is more adept than American film at doing so, for the very simple reason that many of the sets and points of reference for ‘medieval film’ literally survive intact across Europe – an idea driven home by *Monuments stars du 7<sup>e</sup> art*, a fascinating exhibition curated by N. T. Binh in Paris last year at the Centre des monuments nationaux, and by the accompanying exhibition catalogue of the same title.[\(2\)](#)

Having established a solid critical foundation for the balance of his study in part one, Elliott next turns his attention to the characters we see (or think we see) on the screen in cinematic medieval worlds, devoting separate chapters to those who fight, those who rule, those who pray, and those who work. In doing so, his discussion includes an astonishing number of cinematic comparisons and contrasts. Indeed, throughout his book, Elliott discusses more than 150 films, no mean feat and a further testimony to the usefulness and importance of his study. And again, here in this great middle of his study, Elliott is relentless in asking just the right questions.

In discussing, those who fight – the knights who were bold in days of old – Elliott begins with the problems posed in attempting to find a medieval referent. Do we – and filmmakers – look to Chaucer’s idealized Canterbury portrait of the ‘verray parfit, gentil knight’, or to the forcefully aggressive Beowulf, Cuchulain, Roland and their counterparts in *Njals Saga* and *El Cantar del mio Cid*? Is our model chivalric or violent? In seeking to resolve this dilemma, Elliott turns first to iconic recreations of knighthood, then to ways in which film seeks to tame aggression by distinguishing between ‘good knights’ and ‘bad knights’ – in much the same way that the film Western had distinguished between the ‘good guys’ and the ‘bad guys’, sometimes by simply giving them different colored hats, or the trademark post-exit line ‘they went thattaway’. (It should be noted though that the cinematic ‘Black Knight’ is just as likely to be a hero – Alan Ladd in *The Black Knight* – as a villain – James Mason in *Prince Valiant*.) Film further tames knightly aggression by showing how cinematic heroes rightly earn the rank of knight – just as film cowboys had to earn their spurs in what might be considered parallel rites of passage. In the aggregate, film, according to Elliott, has gone to great lengths to present a number of paradigms of knighthood, some at conflict with each other: the swashbuckler knight, the cowboy knight, the action-hero knight – multiple examples of which he compares and contrasts both in terms of different characters portrayed and different actors doing the portraying.

Elliott’s approach to those who rule is similar. Again, he begins by looking at medieval referents, no easy task since there is considerable scholarly debate about the exact nature of kingship in the Middle Ages, made more complicated by differences in time period and geography. Film’s response to this debate, Elliott argues, is to invest characters with a number of clearly demonstrable virtues and vices (or assume that the actors playing them are already so invested because of their other appearances on the screen in a variety of roles medieval and otherwise.) Thus British character actors such as Finlay Currie and Felix Alymer become gray-bearded icons of sagacity regardless of what role they play. And film is not above sanitizing medieval historical figures when it is convenient to do so, thus the widely diverse portraits of Richard I of England in decades and decades of Robin Hood and Crusader films (and television programs). Film kings can be knights, wise rulers of their realms, usurpers, weaklings, and even the most dastardly of villains. Film audiences have come to accept – and in some cases to expect – nothing less.

Borrowing a phrase from Anton K. Kozlovic, Elliott next addresses ‘Saint Cinema’, a prickly topic since saints are by their very nature prickly – men and women who run against the grain. Cinematic hagiography runs the gamut from the overly pious to the skeptical. Treatments of the non-canonized, especially those who

belong to the various ranks of the clergy, is similarly multifaceted. Again, the medieval referent for ecclesiastical figures is contradictory – Chaucer did, after all, give us the Parson, but that living embodiment of the Good Shepherd seems almost too good to be true when compared to, and outnumbered, by the Prioress, the Monk, and the Friar. Elliott notes how film attempts to unpack the riches and the leadership (or lack thereof) of the clergy, and the connection between cross and sword. The contrasts in *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* between the threadbare attire of Francis and the sumptuous vestments of the prelates whom he encounters readily spring to mind. But in the Middle Ages, and to a certain extent, though slightly less so, today, the word *clergy* had multiple referents from parish priest, to prelate, to cloistered monk and nun, to wandering friar. Chaucer's Friar Huberd and the Summoner's skewering in his prologue and his tale of the fraternal orders in general notwithstanding, we seem, thanks to Robin Hood's Tuck, to expect our cinematic friars to be jolly, good natured members of the clergy who find their vows elastic; film monks, bishops, archbishops, and cardinals, on the other hand, seem never to be trustworthy; and screen popes are always singularly political at the expense of their being spiritual. Nuns – whether from the Middle Ages or more modern and postmodern times – always prove problematic when it comes to their depiction on film. Just what are we to make of the composite view of nuns presented in such different films – medieval and later – as *Pope Joan* (either version), the Francis films that include *Clare*, *The Anchoress*, *Hildegard of Bingen*, *The Devils*, *Black Narcissus*, *The Nun's Story*, *Agnes of God*, *The Bells of St. Mary*, *The Song of Bernadette*, *The Trouble with Angels*, *Come to the Stable*, the Watergate scandal spoof *Nasty Habits*, *The Singing Nun*, *The Sound of Music*, *Thérèse*, *In This House of Brede*, *Lilies of the Field*, *Brides of Christ*, *Sister Act* and its sequel, *Dead Man Walking*, and *Heaven Knows, Mr. Alison*?

Addressing film versions of the medieval peasant presents Elliott with a unique problem: the seeming near invisibility of medieval peasantry – although, as Elliott points out, the situation is decidedly more complicated, even if one does not go so far as to adopt Dennis's take on the difference between ruled and ruler in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. The term *class* meant different things in medieval times than it does today and in intervening periods, and film peasants tend to be based on paradigms borrowed from other films rather than from strictly medieval models. They constitute interchangeable faces in the crowd, and are rarely round characters – they are what Elliott nicely calls 'the rent-a crowd' that filmmakers readily and repeatedly seem to employ. Alternately, Elliott argues, medieval peasants have yet another kind of group invisibility, an invisibility that they share with the downtrodden and oppressed in any number of other film genres: women, indigenous people, and minorities by race, creed, religion, ethnicity, or affectional preference.

Elliott then takes up the larger issue of the medieval worlds that we have come to expect on the screen, some shiny and pristine, some gritty and foul, some a little bit of each, but all part of our collective modern and postmodern ideas of the *real* and the *reel* Middle Ages. Elliott nods to others who have discussed neo-medievalism, including Eco, while also offering his own insights into the key question all such discussion must eventually ask: 'to what extent do accuracy and authenticity diverge?' Elliott is not brash enough to think he can answer this crucial question definitively. Rather, with true scholarly humility, he admits that, in the final analysis, he has 'tried to open the field up to further works, by calling into play some useful questions which – it is to be hoped – later scholarship will address in more depth'. Let it be noted that Elliott succeeds admirably in this intention.

The definitive study of 'medieval film' remains Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman's *Cinematic Illuminations: the Middle Ages on Film*.<sup>(3)</sup> Elliott's *Remaking the Middle Ages* is a more than worthy successor to that volume. It is scrupulous in acknowledging its sources and debts; it includes a useful glossary; and it offers an extensive bibliography and filmography, and a carefully crafted (and accurate!) index. It is, in short, an important welcome addition to the series of questions we continue to pose in our discussions about the (dis)connections between the *real* medieval and the *reel* medieval.

## Notes

1. Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (New York, NY, 1986), p. 61. [Back to \(1\)](#)

2. *Monuments stars du 7<sup>e</sup> art* (Paris, 2010).[Back to \(2\)](#)
  3. Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman's *Cinematic Illuminations: The Middle Ages on Film* (Baltimore, MD, 2009).[Back to \(3\)](#)
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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/7776>