The Middle Ages on Film: medieval violence and modern identities

Taught by: Prof. Nora Berend (nb213) and Prof. Liesbeth van Houts (emcv2)

Course description
Through films, we shall investigate how modern identities incorporate medieval history. Our primary focus will be the relationship between religion and violence, and their role in identity formation. Our seven topics from the history of medieval Europe c. 1000-c. 1450 were made (in)famous by their representation on film, but are also firmly grounded in the medieval source material (available in English translation).

Why do modern film-makers turn to medieval topics? What has been the relevance of the Middle Ages in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? What is the relationship between historical authenticity and effective (visual) narrative? Can history be useful for propaganda, ideological and other, only through distortion and the ‘abuse’ of history? We shall discuss in detail how each film uses its medieval subject-matter, in what ways each is an authentic portrayal of medieval events and thought and in what ways and why each changes, distorts or manipulates. In order to do that, we shall read the medieval sources and some historical studies on the medieval events represented. We shall then talk about the modern historical context of each film, which will allow us to highlight fundamental questions about both the process of identity formation, and the changing meanings of religious violence.

Course structure and mode of teaching
The course will consist of 24 lectures and three two-hour classes spread over two terms. After two introductory lectures, we will have 3 lectures on each film, with one concluding lecture at the end. In the classes, we shall develop themes based on several of the films, allowing students to compare and contrast across a number of films. We shall assign presentations to the students, who will also be expected to hand in written work. We expect the students to watch the films in their own time. All films are available at the Seeley Library, and most are inexpensive and can be purchased by students if they wish to do so. A Moodle site will support the lectures and supervisions: it will provide lecture hand-outs, synopses of films, supervision questions, bibliographies and film clips.
Four individual or small-group supervisions will give students the opportunity to study both individual films (with their medieval and modern contexts) and themes. As far as the examination is concerned, students will have to respond to one question on a film-topic, one on a theme, and can choose the third freely. Our expectation is that students will discuss themes with reference to all the relevant films in their medieval and modern contexts, and respond to questions on film-topics drawing on a substantial knowledge of the medieval and modern sources and secondary literature. Students will not be able to take the exam on the basis of simply watching one or two of the films.

Maximum number of students: 16
Bibliography

A. The films and their context


A film version of a rock opera on Stephen I (c. 1000-1038) the first Christian king of Hungary, depicting a clash of Christianity versus paganism, building on national myth-making in order to create national identity.

Bibliography:


Film: István a király, dir. Gábor Koltay, written by Levente Szörényi and János Bródy, 1984, 100 mins. In Hungarian: students will receive an English translation of the text.

A film on one of the early adventurers of the Iberian peninsula, Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar (c. 1043-99), who was subsequently turned into a Christian hero fighting against Muslims in the The Spanish ‘Reconquest’.

**Bibliography:**

P. Such – J. Hodgkinson, *The poem of my Cid* 2nd ed (Warminster, 1991)


I. Zaderenko, A Montaner, ed. *A Companion to the Poema de Mío Cid* (Leiden and Boston, 2018)


https://www.academia.edu/30761405/Rejecting_al-Andalus_exalting_the_Reconquista_historical_memory_in_contemporary_Spain


3. Peter Glenville, Becket (1964)

The film addresses the relationship between Thomas Becket (c. 1118-1170), archbishop of Canterbury, and King Henry II of England (1154-89). What started as a close male friendship resulted in a dramatic fall-out that ended with Becket’s murder. The narrative (based on a play by Jean Anouilh) serves as an excellent introduction for the debate on the ever present tension between Church and State.

Bibliography:


Felice Lifshitz, ‘Ethnicity, Gender and Sexuality in Mid-Century Medievalist Film; The example of Becket (1964)’, *Quaestiones Medii Aevi Novae* 19 (2014) special issue Women and Femininity


Hugh M. Thomas, ‘Shame masculinity and the death of Thomas Becket,’ *Speculum* 87 (2012), 1051-88


Film Reviews:

R.M. Hodgens, ‘Review: Becket,’ *Film Quarterly* Vol. 17 No. 4, 1964


Film: Becket, dir. Peter Glenville, 1964, 148 mins.

A film focusing on the military successes of Alexander Nevsky (1220-63), Grand Prince of Novgorod and Vladimir, who defeated the Mongols and the Teutonic Knights when they attacked his principalities.

Bibliography:


P. Jackson, *The Mongols and the West* (Harlow, 2005)


J. Goodwin, *Eisenstein, Cinema and History* (University of Illinois Press, 1993)


C. Merridale, *Ivan’s War: The Red Army at War 1939-45* (Faber and Faber, 2006)


Film: Alexander Nevsky, dir. Sergei Eisenstein, 1938, 112 mins.

The film is based on an *exemplum* by Stephen of Bourbon (cc. 1190-c. 1261), inquisitor, who wrote a large collection of sermon material. Amongst it is the story recounting how Stephen found that in Lyons a cult had grown up around a greyhound called Guinefort who could cure sick children. The script for the film, based on Stephen of Bourbon’s *exemplum*, was written by a professional historian-medievalist.

Bibliography:


*Heresy and Inquisition in France 1200-1300*, ed. and trans. John H. Arnold and Peter Biller, Manchester Sources in Translation (Manchester 2016), no. 17 (on Stephen de Bourbon)


J. Berlioz, *Saints et damnés. La Bourgogne du moyen Age dans les récits d’Etienne de Bourbon, inquisiteur (1190-1261)* (Dijon, 1989)


Catherine Rider, ‘Elite and popular superstitions in the *exempla* of Stephen de Bourbon,’ *Studies in Church History*, 42 (2006), pp. 78-88


Film: *Le moine et la sorcière* (The Sorceress), dir. S. Schiffman, 1987, 97 minutes; in French with English subtitles.
6. Ingmar Bergman *The Seventh Seal* (1957)

A film combining a variety of medieval topics such as The Plague, crusades, popular religious beliefs and chess, in order to investigate the meaning of life and death.

Bibliography:


R. N. Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe* (Cambridge, 1995 and reprints)


J. M. Clark, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Glasgow, 1950)


I. Bergman, *Images: My Life in Film* (New York, 1994), 231-42


The story of Joan of Arc (c. 1412-31), a girl of modest background through voices and visions learned that she ought to free France from the English during the later part of the so-called Hundred Years War. She led an army but eventually died after a trial (instigated by the English who captured her) as a heretic at the stake. A transcription of her trial has survived. The story combines themes of religion, gender, warfare and ecclesiastical persecution.

Bibliography:

*Joan of Arc. La Pucelle* trans. and annot. C. Taylor, (Manchester Medieval sources series, 2006)


A. Curry, *The Hundred Years War* (Basingstoke, 1993)


Helen Castor, *Joan of Arc, a History* (London, 2014)


K. Sullivan, *The interrogation of Joan of Arc* (Minneapolis, 1999)


J. Aberth, *A Knight at the Movies: Medieval History on Film* (New York, 2003), chapter 6, 257-98

R. Blaetz, *Visions of the Maid. Joan of Arc in American Film and culture* (Charlottesville, 2001)


B Themes

**History and Film**

W. Guynn, *Writing History in Film* (New York, 2006)


R. Rosenstone, ‘History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the possibility of really putting history on film’, ibidem, 1173-85


M. Ferro, *Cinema and History*, trans. N. Greene (Detroit, 1988)

*Screening the Past. Film and Representation of History*, ed. T. Barta (Westport, 1998)

**Medievalism (modern use of the Middle Ages)**


*Studies in Medievalism*; journal since 1979, 17 vols. so far


**Middle Ages and Film**


A.Bernau and B. Bildhauer (eds), *Medieval Film* (Manchester, 2009)

special issue of *Exemplaria* on ‘Movie Medievalism’, 19.2. (Summer 2007), co-edited by Richard Burt and Nickolas Haydock


Martha Driver, ‘Medieval Period in Film’, *Film and History* 29 (1999) nos 1-2, pp. 1-90 and nos. 3-4 1-100 special issues on topic


Martha Driver, ‘Teaching the Middle Ages on Film: Visual Narrative and the Historical Record’, History Compass 5/1 2007, 146-161


Paul Halsall, *Medieval History in the Movies* Online list of over 200 movies depicting Medieval history. From the Internet Medieval Sourcebook.


C.Kiening and H. Adolf (eds), *Mittelalter im Film* (Berlin, 2006)

A.Lindley, ‘The ahistoricism of medieval film’, *Screening the Past* (online), 3

M. Meier and S. Slanicka, *Antike und mittelalter im Film* (Cologne, 2007)

L. T. Ramey and T. Pugh, *Race, Gender and class in ‘Medieval’ cinema* (New Middle Ages series; Basingstoke, 2007)

Identity, ethnicity, nationalism


Leah Greenfeld ‘Nationalism and modernity’ *Social Research: An international quarterly of the social sciences* 63 (1996): 3-40


Stefan Berger, Christoph Conrad, Guy P. Marchal, eds, *Writing the Nation* series (Palgrave Macmillan 2008-2014) (includes the volumes: The past as history: national identity and historical consciousness in modern Europe; Nationalizing the past: Historians as nation builders in modern Europe; The contested nation: Ethnicity, class, religion and gender in national histories; Writing the nation: a global perspective; Disputed territories and shared pasts: overlapping national histories in modern Europe; The uses of the Middle Ages in modern European states)

**Warfare, Violence**


John France, *Western Warfare in the Age of the Crusades 1000-1300* (Ithaca NY, 1999)


J. Finch, ‘The Nature of violence in the Middle Ages: An Alternative Perspective’ *Historical Research* 70, 173 (1997), 243-68

Larissa Tracy, *Torture and Brutality in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, 2012)


Christianization, conversion


James Muldoon, ed., *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages* (Gainesville FL, 1997)


Religiosity, medieval religious practices


Lester K. Little and Barbara H. Rosenwein, eds., *Debating the Middle Ages* (Malden MA – Oxford, 1998), Part IV: Religion and Society


---, *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2008)

---, *Why can the dead do such great things? Saints and worshippers from the martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton, 2013)


A. Vauchez, *The laity in the Middle Ages: religious beliefs and practices* (Notre-Dame IN, 1997)

----------------, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. J. Birrell (Cambridge, 1997)

Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society* (Chicago, 1982)

**Religions in conflict, religious confrontation (Christians and Muslims)**

‘AHR Conversation: Religious Identities and Violence’, *The American Historical Review*, vo. 112, no. 5 (December 2007), 1433-81


Michael Gervers and James M. Powell, eds., *Tolerance and Intolerance: Social Conflict in the Age of the Crusades* (Syracuse NY, 2001)


James Turner Johnson, *The Holy War Idea in Western and Islamic Traditions* (University Park PA, 1997)


Frederick H. Russell, *The Just War in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1977)


**Speech/language**


R. Burt, ‘Getting Schmedieval: of manuscript and film prologues, paratexts and parodies’, Exemplaria 18 (2006), 1-22 and also chapter in Burt, Medieval and early Modern Film and Media

M. W. Driver, ‘“We band of brothers”: rousing speeches from Robin Hood to Black knight’, in R. Evans, H. Fulton and D. Mathews (eds), Medieval Cultural Studies: Essays in honour of Stephen Knight (Cardiff, 2006), 91-106

R. Balzaretti, ‘Spoken narratives in ninth-century Milanese court records’, Narrative and History in the early Medieval West, eds E. M. Tyler and R. Balzaretti (Turnhout, 2006), 11-38

C. O’Sullivan, ‘A time of translation: linguistic difference and cinematic medievalism’, in Bernau and Bildhauer (eds), Medieval Film, 60-85

**Historical environment and landscape**

P. Everson and T. Williamson (eds), The Archaeology of Landscape (Manchester, 1998)


J. Grenvile, Medieval Housing, The Archaeology of medieval Britain (London, 1997)

P. Héliot, ‘Le Château-Gaillard et les fortresses des XIIe et XIIIe siècles en Europe occidentale’, Château-Gaillard, 1 (1962), 53-74

John Howe and Michael Wolfe eds, Inventing Medieval Landscapes (Gainesville, 2002)

G. Meirion-Jones and M. Jones (eds), Manorial domestic buildings in England and Northern France (London, 1993), 82-120

J.Mesqui, Châteaux forts et fortification en France (Paris, 1997)


P. Rocolle, Les temps de châteaux forts Xe-XVe siècles (Paris, 1994)

R. Fish, Cinematic countrysides, Inside Popular Film (Manchester, 2007)
Emotions

Per Fornegard, Erika Kihlman, Mia Åkestam, Gunnel Engwell, eds. Tears, sighs and laughter: expressions of emotions in the Middle Ages (Stockholm, 2017)

Gerhard Jaritz, ed., Emotions and Material Culture: International Round-Table Discussion (Vienna, 2003)


Henrik Lagerlund – Mikko Yrjönsuuri, eds., Emotions and Choice from Boethius to Descartes (Dordrecht – Boston MA, 2002)


Barbara H. Rosenwein, ‘Worrying about Emotions in History,’ The American Historical Review 107.3 (2002), 821-45


..., Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages (Ithaca – London, 2006)


Medieval biography


R. Morse, ‘Medieval biography; a branch of literature’, *Modern Language review* 80 (1985), 257-68


**Gender, femininity and masculinity**

K. Adler, R. Balzaretti and Michele Mitchell, ‘Practising gender history’, *Gender and History* 20 (2008), 1-7


S. Edgington and S. Lambert (eds), *Gendering the Crusades* (Cardiff, 2001)

*Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, D. M. Hadley (London, 1999)


E. van Houts, *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe 900-1200* (Basingstoke, 1999)

D. Youngs, *The Life Cycle in Western Europe, c. 1300-1500* (Manchester, 2006)

C. Miller-Avrich and V. Blanton-Whetsell, *Medieval women in Film* Subsidia series

S. Neale, ‘Masculinity as spectacle; reflections on men and mainstream cinema’, *Screen* 24 (1983), 2-16

L. T. Ramey and T. Pugh, *Race, Gender and class in ‘Medieval’ cinema* (New Middle Ages series; Basingstoke, 2007)

**Rulership and power**


Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, ed. *Historiography in the Middle Ages* (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2003), chap 7. Dynastic History


-------------, *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe* (London, 1997)

J. Dunbabin, *Captivity and Imprisonment in Medieval Europe, 1000-1300* (Basingstoke, 2002)


R. Schneider, *Das spätmittelalterliche Königtum im europäischen Vergleich* (Sigmaringen, 1987)


*Further readings in foreign languages are available on request.*
Sample questions:

To what extent do modern gender interpretations allow us to understand Jeanne’s male persona?

Contemporaries and modern commentators alike have found it difficult to account for Jeanne's military expertise. Why?

How do you account for the medieval and modern fascination with the life story of Jeanne d’Arc?

Analyse the role of women in the cult of the greyhound.

What does King Stephen I represent to twentieth-century Hungarians?

Why and how does Bergman create a composite ‘Middle Ages’ in the Seventh Seal?

How do you account for the enduring ‘ethnic’ theme of Saxon versus Norman in the film version of the conflict between Becket and Henry II?

What role, if any, can films play in recapturing medieval emotions?

How does film reflect historical reality?

Is medieval history more distorted when used in films conveying political messages than in films about eternal questions such as the meaning of life?

‘Modern films on the Middle Ages can only be misleading’. Discuss

How does violence in the movies relate to medieval violence?

‘Modern representations place more emphasis on medieval personal rule than medieval kings did.’ Discuss.

What does the representation of medieval religious violence tell us about modern identities?