

**Based on a True History?: The Impact of Popular 'Medieval Film' on the  
Public Understanding of the Middle Ages**

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Leeds

Institute for Medieval Studies and

Centre for World Cinemas

September, 2010

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## Acknowledgements

An early draft of this thesis contained the line ‘Epic films do not spring, fully-fledged, from the skull of Mel Gibson’. While that line (and the glibness and amusing metaphor it contains) are gone, the sentiment is still there; no matter whose name is in bold on the poster, films are a collaborative art form with hundreds of people working to create the final product. A thesis is no different; just because my name is on the title page does not mean that I did not enjoy the collaborative efforts of a number of people, all of whom deserve acknowledgement and thanks.

First and foremost, my supervisors. The interdisciplinarity of this project demanded expertise from a variety of fields, and as such I received helpful advice from a larger-than-usual number of people in different disciplines. Firstly, Professor Richard K. Morris, my supervisor from the Institute for Medieval Studies, without whom my project would probably not been accepted. He has been as supportive as a person could hope for in the face of the many difficulties a project like this inevitably finds, and has maintained both a critical eye and good humour throughout. My second supervisor, Professor Lúcia Nagib, challenged me to revise my instinctual problems with critical theory, and helped me to not just ‘talk the talk’ but also ‘walk the walk’ of Film Studies. During my first year I received supervision from Professor Andrew Wawn, from the English department, without whom I suspect my analyses of *Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings* would have been not as nuanced as they are. Professor David Morrison from the Institute for Communications Studies provided a crucial methodological ‘leg-up’ at an important moment, meeting with me a number of times, providing books and bibliographies and advice, entirely *pro bono*, in order to help me teach myself to be an audience researcher. Finally, my fifth column: Professor Elizabeth Sturtevant of the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University (and also, incidentally, my mother). I highly recommend that every PhD student have a mother who is a professor in a cognate field. She helped with everything throughout, from challenging my assumptions, refining my research questions, being there to constantly bounce ideas off and, during one set of particularly

memorable Christmas and summer vacations, providing the electric shock therapy necessary to begin, and keep, writing.

The fieldwork completed for this PhD relied upon a few colleagues and friends who provided crucial assistance on the days of the focus groups: Cassie and Nicholas Dupras, Michael Garcia, Steve Werronen and Joanna Phillips. Also, I would like to thank all the participants in the study for volunteering their time and providing such ample fodder for this study. I would also like to thank Wendy Cook, manager of the Hyde Park Picture House, for providing a number of film passes that were used to reward the participants in the study for their time; it made a financially-difficult venture easier to accomplish.

Those who volunteered their time to read and comment upon my thesis deserve thanks as well. In addition to the above-mentioned supervisors, I had very helpful editorial advice provided by Axel Müller and Geoffrey Humble.

I must thank the support structure at the Institute for Medieval Studies, particularly Alison Martin and Mary Swan, for being efficient, straightforward and chasing me when I needed chasing. During the course of my PhD I have worked half-time for the Lifelong Learning Centre at the University of Leeds in order to fund my life. My managers and colleagues there have been incredibly helpful and supportive, (especially Jane Hanna and Kate Barley) allowing me time off, commiseration and ample cups of tea when needed. They deserve my thanks.

We live in an exciting era for researchers; every year it seems there is a new technological development which expands our ability to find and utilise the vast swath of human experience. Even better for students, these resources are often free. As such, the developers of the open-source bibliographical program Zotero (at George Mason University) deserve thanks —for providing a tool which makes the boring task of source management and bibliography remarkably easy, and doing so for free: <http://www.zotero.org>. Additionally, I have found the Google Books, Google Scholar, and JSTOR online research tools crucial in helping me find what needed finding (and a few other things along the way).

I would like to thank my family— my father Dave Sturtevant, my sister Lee and my brother Dan— for facilitating, encouraging, visiting and supporting me through my time in the UK. Finally, (and so in the second place of honour), I must thank my girlfriend – or better put, partner—Tamsin Badcoe. She not only provided editorial advice on my thesis and a valuable sounding-board for ideas, but moreover, continually helped keep me happy, healthy and sane throughout. Without her, this would not have been possible.

## Abstract

This thesis examines the understanding of the Middle Ages among the UK public and the impact that popular big-budget films which depict the period have on that understanding. Three films released between 2000 and 2009 are chosen for detailed study, their selection being determined by success at the UK box office as a measure of popularity: *Lord of the Rings, Return of the King* (Jackson, 2003), *Kingdom of Heaven* (Scott, 2005) and *Beowulf* (Zemeckis, 2007).

Ten focus group interviews were conducted with nineteen participants, all between eighteen and twenty-six years of age, none of whom had studied the Middle Ages at GCSE level (age 14-16) or higher. In these groups, participants discussed their knowledge of the Middle Ages, were shown a film, and then discussed what they had seen. Participants were asked open-ended interview questions to encourage them to respond in their own terms and define what was important to them. As a result, topics ranged widely. In preliminary discussions, participants discussed how they understood the period, their academic, experiential and pop-culture sources of knowledge, their definitions of the similar terms 'medieval' and 'Middle Ages' and also their ideas about medieval culture, religion, warfare and crusade. After the films, participants discussed what they had seen usually in the context of what they already knew, sometimes constructing false memories of what they had seen which fit with their previous knowledge. Often they used the language of historical veracity to criticise the film for other related reasons (like poor filmmaking or inappropriate accents). They found support for many of their historical misconceptions in the films, but, rather than accepting all they saw as historical truth, they engaged in a complex critical discourse with what they were shown.

The findings of this thesis have implications for medieval (and medievalism) studies, public history, and for the delivery of history in primary, secondary and higher education.

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## Chapter 1: On 'medievalism' and the 'medieval film'

Medievalism is the continuing process of creating the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup>

Leslie Workman, *Studies in Medievalism* 8

It is the medieval world. Marauders, pilgrims, and wandering gleemen go about in it. The knight stands at his garden pale, the lady sits at her bower window, and the little foot page carries messages over moss and moor. Marchmen are riding through the Bateable Land 'by the hie light o' the moon.' Monks are chanting in St. Mary's Kirk, trumpets are blowing in Carlisle town, castles are burning; down in the glen there is an ambush and swords are flashing; bows are twanging in the greenwood; four and twenty ladies are playing at the ball, and four and twenty milk-white calves are in the woods of Glentanner — all ready to be stolen. About Yule the round tables begin; the queen looks over the castle-wall, the palmer returns from the Holy Land, Young Waters lies deep in Stirling dungeon, but Child Maurice is in the silver wood, combing his yellow locks with a silver comb.<sup>2</sup>

Henry Beers, *A History of English Romanticism in the Eighteenth Century*

What now? Let me tell you what now. [...] I'ma get medieval on your ass.<sup>3</sup>

Marcellus Wallace, *Pulp Fiction*

The Middle Ages are open to interpretation. They have been articulated and rearticulated by academic, political and popular culture since the idea of 'Middle Ages' arose in the fifteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Each new configuration reflects and revises what the Middle Ages are understood to have been. The Middle Ages have been regarded as backwards-seeming ancestor or source of passion, beauty and inspiration. They are seen as both opulent and filthy, sage and barbarian, playful and sombre. They are the source of many of Europe's national histories, identities, myths and legends. They are used as a justification for the present or a warning for the future. They are

<sup>1</sup> Leslie Workman, 'Preface', *Studies in Medievalism*, 8 (1996), 1-2 (p.1).

<sup>2</sup> Henry Augustin Beers, *A History of English Romanticism in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1899), p. 281.

<sup>3</sup> Quentin Tarantino, *Pulp Fiction* (Miramax Entertainment, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Historians of the Italian renaissance, such as Flavio Biondo, began to recognise the Middle Ages as a period of history distinct from their own during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Conrad Rudolph argues this was 'something Biondo's contemporaries and immediate followers gradually formalized with terms such as *media tempestas* (1469), *media aetas* (1518), and *media tempora* (1531). The actual term *medium aevum* [...] is first found by at least 1604; with the English equivalent following immediately afterwards'. Conrad Rudolph, *A Companion to Medieval Art: Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), p. 4.

both our real history and our collective fantasy playground. These articulations of the Middle Ages, whether they are academic or popular, serious or playful, are called 'medievalism'.<sup>5</sup> A full history of medievalism has yet to be written, if ever one could be.<sup>6</sup>

As Workman's elegant definition of medievalism, quoted above, demonstrates, Medievalism is not the process of *re-creating* the Middle Ages as they were, but continually creating them anew. The Middle Ages are lost; every attempt to explore or restore them by academics, antiquaries, artists or other producers of culture, renders a new version of the Middle Ages, not the Middle Ages themselves. By extrapolation, Workman's assertion implies that those who in their spare time strap on armour and spend their weekends in fields replaying the Battle of Agincourt are not, as they are commonly known, *re-enactors*. They are *enactors* of their own Middle Ages, one that has never existed but is born out of a long tradition of medievalism. That tradition continues to this day, in academic, political and popular parlance, enticing us and entertaining us in every medium.

## **Aims and outline**

The aim of what follows is to examine medievalisms of the past ten years (2000-2009) in the medium of film. The thesis examines trends in the depiction of the Middle Ages in popular Hollywood films between 2000 and 2009, but particularly focuses on audience reception: how films are interpreted by those who view them and what members of audiences learn by watching them. It aims to investigate what the public understands about the Middle Ages, and how that understanding is influenced by medieval films. Of course, with that said, there is not one 'public' but many, each defined in varying ways by categories of nation, ethnicity, class or other social and

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<sup>5</sup> For a seminal view of the concept of medievalism, see Tom Shippey and Richard Utz, 'Medievalism in the Modern World: Introductory Perspectives', in *Medievalism in the Modern World: Essays in Honour of Leslie J. Workman* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), pp. 1-14. For a broad view of the current state of medievalism studies and a history of the discipline, see chapters 1-9 in 'Defining Medievalism(s)', *Studies in Medievalism*, ed. by Karl Fugelso, XVII (2009), 1-91.

<sup>6</sup> The most complete interdisciplinary engagement with the history of medievalism is: Michael Alexander, *Medievalism: The Middle Ages in Modern England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). However his focus is on the development of medievalisms until the twentieth century; his epilogue only mentions film, TV and the audiovisual media of that century (and the current one) to say they are beyond his scope (p. 267).

cultural characteristics. The 'public', indeed, is ultimately protean and defined only by the one viewing it. For present practical purposes, this thesis explores only one demographic of the larger 'public': British-born young people who have not studied the Middle Ages beyond the age of sixteen, who are active moviegoers and viewers of medieval film, and are undergraduate students at the University of Leeds aged between eighteen and twenty-six. This sampling, and the rationale behind it, is explored in chapter three.

Mass-media medievalisms have the power to shape cultural interpretations of the Middle Ages in their audiences. The visual media are particularly apt at this. As Robert Rosenstone asserts, 'A century after the invention of motion pictures, the visual media have become arguably the chief carrier of historical messages in our culture'.<sup>7</sup> Historical films provide compelling narratives and gripping visuals which shape the historical consciousness of those who watch them. Though this may elicit concern among educators, lest film-goers absorb anachronisms and other inaccuracies, little research has been done which shows how audiences actually interact with historical films or what they learn from them. This thesis seeks to begin to rectify this. The remainder of this chapter sets out to define a few of the key concepts, particularly 'medievalism' and 'medieval film'. To contextualise the remainder of the thesis it will also reflect on aspects of the aesthetic and political provenance of the contemporary medieval film.

Chapter two provides an outline of research which has been done to date on medieval film, and explains how this thesis differs from it, notably by making use of theories and methodologies drawn from education and the social sciences. Chapter three outlines the methodology used for the thesis's sociological fieldwork. It explains the formation of the research questions, the sampling of the focus groups and the moderator's questions. Chapter four provides a close reading of the three films that were seen in the focus groups: *Beowulf*, *Kingdom of Heaven* and *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, particularly their source material, historical

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<sup>7</sup> *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past*, ed. by Robert A. Rosenstone (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 3.

veracity, political ideology, aesthetics and filmmaking techniques.<sup>8</sup> It does this to contextualise the responses of the focus groups. The results of the study outlined in chapter three comprise chapters five, six and seven. Chapter five is concerned solely with the responses given by the participants that discuss their understanding of the Middle Ages, without the films used in the study, and covers their past interactions with the Middle Ages in popular culture as well as how they understand specific aspects of the period such as landscape, chronology, iconic characters and the crusades. Chapters six and seven analyse the results of the participants' commentary on the films screened during the study. Chapter six analyses the response to the films individually, focusing on issues specific to each film; for example, how the computerised filmmaking techniques of *Beowulf* influenced their appreciation of the history of the story, how a political allegory underpins the message of *Kingdom of Heaven*, and the question of whether or not *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* should be considered 'medieval' at all. Chapter seven offers a comparative analysis in which participants' responses are examined thematically across the films to throw light upon how the understandings expressed in chapter five are either reinforced or revised by the films. Chapter eight offers some conclusions and points towards avenues for further research.

The contemporary public's understanding of the medieval past and its interaction with historical film is a subject too large to be done justice in a single thesis. This thesis nevertheless makes a start: it offers a new way of exploring the subject, and a number of provocative revisions to commonly-held ideas about public interaction with the medieval past.

### **What is a 'medieval film'?**

One of the most productive sources of medievalisms in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has been the film industry. Medieval films are not rare; cinematic depictions of medieval history, tales or legends, films with a recognisably medieval 'flavour' and fantasies set in medievaesque

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Zemeckis, *Beowulf* (Paramount Pictures, 2007); Ridley Scott, *Kingdom of Heaven* (20th Century Fox, 2005); Peter Jackson, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (New Line Cinema, 2003).

worlds are commonplace and popular. It is difficult to define precisely what makes a film recognisably 'medieval' (a problem which will be explored in chapter 2 and beyond). David Williams defines 'medieval movies' as 'Not films made in the Middle Ages, of course, but there is in the narrative cinema *a medieval world whose images are familiar* and from whose power and excitement perhaps not even professional medievalists are quite immune' [my emphasis].<sup>9</sup> Here, Williams sets out one of the core difficulties of approaching medieval films: many of these films show us a similar world with similar images that construct a uniquely cinematic Middle Ages. That cinematic Middle Ages is *a* rather than *the* Middle Ages. More problematically, the cinematic Middle Ages, with its familiar images, has been used so often to depict legends or outright fantasy worlds that it may blend reality and fantasy in the mind of the viewer. If the visual and iconic groundwater from which both history films and fantasy films draw are the same, or similar, mixing may be inevitable. It is undeniable that the corpus of films on medieval subjects is impressive, and as a result, their potential to impact social consciousness is far-reaching. Kevin Harty's book *The Reel Middle Ages* catalogues over nine hundred films which depict the Middle Ages made before 1999. This includes one that stretches back to the beginning of the medium: *Jeanne d'Arc*, directed by Georges Méliès in 1897.<sup>10</sup>

As Williams notes, since no films can be truly 'medieval' in origin, the term 'medieval film' has come to denote 'films which portray the Middle Ages' rather than 'films made during the Middle Ages'. 'Medievalist film' is here preferred over 'medieval film' for two reasons. First, it avoids the obvious retort that 'there were no films in the Middle Ages'. Second (and more importantly), it reinforces the idea that these films are works of medievalism and asserts the idea that the filmmakers who make them *are medievalists* in the sense that they are acting as historians (an idea first voiced by Robert Rosenstone, discussed in the next chapter). With that

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<sup>9</sup> David Williams, 'Medieval Movies', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 20 (1990), 1-32 (p. 1).

<sup>10</sup> Kevin J. Harty, *The Reel Middle Ages: American, Western and Eastern European, Middle Eastern, and Asian Films About Medieval Europe* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999), pp. 265-266.

having been said, 'medieval film' is the commonly used academic parlance when discussing this topic. Therefore 'medieval film' will be used henceforth for the sake of clarity and consistency.

### **Whence the medieval film?**

Films that depict the Middle Ages are both a product of (and reflect) a specific cultural moment, and are yet a part of a long evolutionary process. The Middle Ages have been interpreted in the arts since the Middle Ages (even though they did not think of themselves as 'medievalists'); *Beowulf*, *The Song of Roland* or the Icelandic Sagas (to name but a few) can be accurately described as historical fiction set in the Middle Ages. Artistic re-renderings of the Middle Ages have continued ever since. Aesthetic and ideological traces of these previous medievalisms, whether in art, architecture, literature or theatre, can still be found in use in film today. The audiences of past medievalisms gave birth to the audiences of present medievalisms. What follows is a brief survey of major trends in the depiction of the Middle Ages in film. It is not comprehensive; a full exploration of the corpus of the medieval film which traces the development of its tropes and modes of representation has yet to be accomplished, and is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Today's audiences of medieval films are the children and grandchildren of audiences of previous generations of medieval films. Similarly, the contemporary films examined here are the inheritors of a long evolutionary tradition of medievalisms. Filmmakers draw their depictions of the period from previous successful films as often as (or more often than) they take them from authentically medieval sources. Furthermore, they do not merely draw from other films but also take inspiration from many other media. The borrowings are regenerative; filmmakers working in the early cinema created depictions similar to the Middle Ages with which they were familiar. As a result, in Hollywood, British, German and Eastern European filmmakers often referenced romantic and pre-Raphaelite art, aped the operas of Verdi and Wagner, and planted stylised versions of Gothic revival buildings in the back lots of California. As a result, nineteenth-century modes of

depicting the Middle Ages have become the received standard depiction of the period: frozen and infinitely reproducible in celluloid, and a source of endless borrowings and *homages*.

### **Dominant modes of depicting the Middle Ages in film**

Aesthetically, medieval films often mix imitations of authentically medieval works with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century modes of depiction of the period to render an opulent and idealised medieval world in vivid Technicolor. This is especially apparent in pre-1970 adventure films such as *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), *Prince Valiant* (1954), *The Court Jester* (1956) or *Camelot* (1967).<sup>11</sup> Two of the three Disney films to depict the Middle Ages, *The Sword in the Stone* (1963) and *Robin Hood* (1973), follow this formula.<sup>12</sup> Over the course of the 1960s, the dominance of an idealised image of the Middle Ages was supplanted by a darker, gritty and more pessimistic vision of the period, as seen in *Becket* (1964), *The War Lord* (1965) and *The Lion in Winter* (1968).<sup>13</sup> The trend was then exaggerated in subsequent decades by films such as *Lancelot du Lac* (1974), *Excalibur* (1981), *Henry V* (1989), *Army of Darkness* (1992), *Braveheart* (1995), *The Thirteenth Warrior* (1999) and even Disney's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996).<sup>14</sup> This increasingly dominant vision of the Middle Ages is full of mud, blood, war and disease, and conflicts with the previous depiction of a more opulent, merry Middle Ages. Not long after this image came into vogue, it was parodied by *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*:

Peasant: Who's that then?

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Curtiz and William Keighley, *The Adventures Of Robin Hood* (Warner Brothers, 1938); Henry Hathaway, *Prince Valiant* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1954); Melvin Frank and Norman Panama, *The Court Jester* (Paramount, 1956); Joshua Logan, *Camelot* (Warner Brothers, 1967).

<sup>12</sup> Wolfgang Reitherman, *The Sword In The Stone* (Walt Disney Studios, 1963); Wolfgang Reitherman, *Robin Hood* (Walt Disney Studios, 1973). The third is: Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Walt Disney Studios, 1996). When listing only three medieval Disney films here, I am only counting those which are explicitly medieval, in that they are adaptations of medieval legends or are set in the Middle Ages. Disney's fairy tales, though in some ways recognizably, or implicitly medieval, are not explicitly so and thus are not counted here. Disney's fairy tales will be discussed further below.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Glenville, *Becket* (Paramount, 1964); Franklin J. Schaffner, *The War Lord* (Universal Pictures, 1965); Anthony Harvey, *The Lion In Winter* (Avco Embassy Pictures, 1968).

<sup>14</sup> Robert Bresson, *Lancelot du Lac* (Artificial Eye, 1974); John Boorman, *Excalibur* (Warner Brothers, 1981); Kenneth Branagh, *Henry V* (MGM (Video & DVD), 1989); Sam Raimi, *Army of Darkness: Evil Dead 3* (Universal Pictures, 1993); Mel Gibson, *Braveheart* (Paramount, 1995); John McTiernan and Michael Crichton, *The 13th Warrior* (Touchstone Pictures, 1999); Trousdale and Wise, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

The Dead Collector: I dunno, must be a king.

Peasant: Why?

The Dead Collector: He hasn't got shit all over him.<sup>15</sup>

Postmodern cynicism which leads one to question idealistic revisions of the past —like the aforementioned Technicolor adventures—may cause one instinctually to label this darker revision ‘more realistic’ than its predecessors. However, it is not. It is not closer to an imaginary empirical *zeitgeist* of the Middle Ages. Instead, it conforms more closely to the culturally-determined and specific popular image which is currently in vogue. The Middle Ages were never as good or as bad as we desire or require them to be. Though this thesis attempts to get beyond a simple measure of ‘historical accuracy’, it is important to remember that these constructions are just that. Their past is not *the* past, no matter how sophisticated or new.

### **Hypermedievalism**

Neither of these two modes of depicting the Middle Ages— bright and cheery or muddy and bloody— arose spontaneously. Rather, they arose as the result of a phenomenon whereby the Middle Ages are brought to heel in service of a cultural idea about the past. In all art forms, there is a tendency for the authentically-medieval to be deemed ‘not medieval enough’, and that it must be altered and exaggerated in order to conform to an *idea* of the Middle Ages. The medieval is altered in an attempt to fix or improve it, to make it more awful or more awesome. It becomes the Middle Ages not as they were, but as they should have been.

I call this phenomenon ‘hypermedievalism’. Hypermedievalism often pushes historical material culture and even the human figure to grotesque extremes. While this process of exaggeration is not unique to depictions of the Middle Ages (for example, see the rendering of the classical world in *300* or *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*), the fact that the Middle Ages has been

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<sup>15</sup> Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (EMI Films, 1974).



appropriated as a fantasy playground validates the grotesques that this tendency produces.<sup>16</sup> As a result, hypermedievalism is far more common than hyperclassicism or hypervictorianism.

Iterations of hypermedieval fantasy and depictions of medieval reality often borrow from one another and share similar aesthetic bases. For example, the fantastical medievalist art of Frank Frazetta and Boris Vallejo has, over the course of the twentieth century, spawned a genre of art replete with bulging barbarians and barely-armoured medieval babes.<sup>17</sup> In these, the idea of the Middle Ages which is exaggerated is the 'savagery' and 'barbarity' often attributed to the period. Armour is adorned with spikes, patches of fur or sharp gothic fluting. Swords grow to giant proportions, are given serrated edges and barbs, and drip gore. Everything is painted black, including the sky, the castles and the land.<sup>18</sup>

This genre of art commonly adorns pulp fantasy novel covers, illustrations, calendars, posters, and comic books. Subsequently, it has been borrowed for use in other visual media, like video games, TV and film, especially when they depict barbarians and Vikings. This is particularly problematic when the aesthetic is used in films which mix fantasy and reality, such as depictions of medieval legends or realistic fantasy films. Some examples of these include *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991), *Braveheart* (1995), *The Thirteenth Warrior* (1999), and *King Arthur* (2004).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Zack Snyder, *300* (Warner Brothers, 2007); Jesse Warn, Michael Hurst and Rick Jacobson, *Spartacus: Blood And Sand* (Starz, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Frank Frazetta, *Testament: A Celebration of the Life & Art of Frank Frazetta*, ed. by Arnie Fenner and Cathy Fenner (Underwood Books, 2008); Mark Kidwell and others, *The Fantastic Worlds Of Frank Frazetta, Volume 1* (Image Comics, 2008); Boris Vallejo and Julie Bell, *Boris Vallejo and Julie Bell: The Ultimate Collection* (Paper Tiger, 2005). 'Barbarians' is not an uncontroversial term in an academic context. While in an academic context, 'barbarians' only denotes those groups which invaded the Empire towards its demise, contemporary medievalist popular culture often amalgamates many distinct groups (separated by centuries) under that overarching title: Vikings, Anglo-Saxons, Huns, Vandals, Goths and more. The term was originally used by Romans to describe pejoratively those on the edges of their empire, but has subsequently become a catch-all generally referring to a hairy, fur-wearing sort of uncivilised person.

<sup>18</sup> Even when not adhering to the grotesque distortions of the human figure or the 'dark' aesthetic commonly seen in Frazetta and Vallejo's work, the genre of fantasy art follows many of the models they set. This includes the use of extreme detail and vividly saturated colours—ironically rendering these fantasy scenes in a 'hyper-real' way. For examples, see: Dick Jude, *Fantasy Art Masters: The Best Fantasy and Science Fiction Artists Show How They Work* (New York, NY: Watson-Guptill, 1999), pp. 12-60; Bruce Robertson, *Techniques of Fantasy Art* (London: Macdonald Orbis, 1988); Jane Frank and Howard Frank, *Great Fantasy Art: Themes from the Frank Collection* (London: Paper Tiger, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> Kevin Reynolds, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (Warner Brothers, 1991); Gibson, *Braveheart*; McTiernan and Crichton, *The 13th Warrior*; Antoine Fuqua, *King Arthur* (Buena Vista, 2004).

Hypermedievalism is not limited to the depiction of busy barbarians, nor is it an exclusively twentieth-century phenomenon. It can be argued that this is a fundamental feature of many medievalisms, in all art forms, and is present wherever history is re-rendered to fit an idea of what that history should be. For example, though much Gothic Revival architecture of the nineteenth century was closely based on medieval models, this also fed a tendency towards hypermedievalism, evident for instance in the work of William Burges, or the eclecticism of architects like Butterfield.<sup>20</sup> This variety of hypermedievalism often produced buildings that were an ahistorical pastiche of exaggerated medieval styles. Horace Walpole and similar designers of the early Gothic Revival were said to have ‘no idea how Gothic buildings were constructed, nor did they care. What they were after was atmosphere’.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps more shockingly, many medieval buildings were subjected to a hyper-medieval makeover. Artists strove to render the landscape, and its medieval contents, ‘picturesque’, where, as Jonathan Bate argues, ‘nature must be re-envisioned as art’.<sup>22</sup> Sometimes this was figurative (in the both senses of the word), where the artists of the Romantic period framed and refigured a ruined medieval past and set it into a landscape which could only be rendered perfectly picturesque by the imagination. Sometimes, the hypermedievalising drive was more literal. Medieval castles at Windsor and Arundel ‘were remodelled to conform to the Victorian idea of what a medieval castle should look like’.<sup>23</sup> Helmsley Castle on the other hand had its original and extant features reduced to ruin by its owners in order to render it more picturesque in the nineteenth century, while its defences were subsequently doctored by the Office of Works to resemble what academics then believed they

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<sup>20</sup> J. Mordaunt Crook, *William Burges and the High Victorian Dream* (London: John Murray, 1981); Paul Thompson, *William Butterfield* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1971). Cf. Rosemary Hill, *God's Architect: Pugin and the Building of Romantic Britain* (London: Allen Lane, 2007). Cf. Georg Germann, *Gothic Revival in Europe and Britain: Sources, Influences and Ideas*, trans. by Gerald Onn (London: Lund Humphries for the Architectural Association, 1972).

<sup>21</sup> W. S. Lewis, *Horace Walpole's Library*, Sandars Lectures, 1957 (Cambridge: University Press, 1958), p. 14. This is in reference to Walpole's estate Strawberry Hill, which is an odd pastiche of ecclesiastical and military medieval architectural styles with no apparent theme or logic.

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2000), p. 135.

<sup>23</sup> *Medievalism and the Quest for the 'Real' Middle Ages*, ed. by Clare A. Simmons (London: Frank Cass, 2001), p. 7.

should have been like in the twentieth. The nineteenth-century architect Sir Gilbert Scott said apologetically (and seemingly without irony) of the Abbey Church of Selby:

It may not, perhaps, be the most splendid of all those noble fabrics, though it ranks amongst the first of them, nor can it boast those accidental and picturesque charms with which nature has clothed the ruined abbeys as if to throw a veil over their desolation, but it possesses the far higher, though less picturesque, advantage of not being a ruin.<sup>24</sup>

This romantic, picturesque idea of the Middle Ages is thus imprinted in landscape visible today. Convincing fakes, bizarre pastiches and palimpsests sit, camouflaged and often indistinguishable from the authentically medieval alongside. Such hypermedievalisms enter public consciousness. It was only a matter of time before they were fixed in film, and endlessly recycled.

### **Political hypermedievalisms**

Nineteenth-century political interpretations of the Middle Ages have also been crystallised in medieval film. During the nineteenth century, the Middle Ages were routinely co-opted for political purposes both in public discourse and in the arts. Often the artistic uses of the Middle Ages were in the establishment of a mythological past full of nostalgic heroism for the establishment and promotion of ethnic or national identities. This manifested in a wide range of art forms including opera, theatre, novels and fairy tales.<sup>25</sup>

As a result, many films of the twentieth century have used the Middle Ages for the same nationalistic purposes. Many of the best-regarded medieval films are either pieces of state-

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<sup>24</sup> Yorkshire Archaeological and Topographical Association, *Report of the Excursion to Selby and Hemingborough, August 28, 1878* (York: Yorkshire Post, 1878), p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> For example, Wagner's medievalist operas *Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser*, *Parsifal* and *Der Ring des Nibelungen* were part of a project to establish a 'national' Germanic culture that claimed its origins in medieval romance, legend, myth and folklore. Verdi's *I Lombardi alla Prima Crociata* is part of a similar nation-defining project in Italy. Philip Vilas Bohlman, *The Music of European Nationalism: Cultural Identity and Modern History* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2004), pp. 183-186; Hans A. Pohlsander, *National Monuments and Nationalism in 19th Century Germany* (Peter Lang, 2008), pp. 32-35. Paul Robinson, *Opera & Ideas, from Mozart to Strauss* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 155-174. In England, the novels of Sir Walter Scott, particularly *Ivanhoe*, popularised ideas of the medieval origins of English 'Saxon' ethnic and political identity. As Clare Simmons argues, '*Ivanhoe* provided a pattern for oppositions that the nineteenth century's need to classify – and to judge – took further than the earlier myth of the Norman Yoke implied', and 'inspired popular interest in Saxons and Normans'. Clare A. Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest: History and Myth in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), p. 11.

sponsored political propaganda or have highly nationalistic overtones.<sup>26</sup> Even when not used for overtly nationalistic purposes, the Middle Ages have often been used in film to promote, and invent historical precedent for, the political, religious or cultural ideals of the people who make and consume them.<sup>27</sup> Most recent Hollywood-style medieval films are rarely overtly propagandistic, political or moralising as they are designed to appeal to the global marketplace. Though they sometimes pay homage to American cultural metanarratives (e.g. rote use of ‘freedom’, ‘liberty’, or ‘equality’ narratives), globalisation has had a homogenising effect on big-budget films. In order to appeal to a broad global audience, the morality and politics on display in these big-budget films are often calculatedly conventional, uncontroversial and malleable.<sup>28</sup> Blandly acceptable modern morals are often put in medieval mouths, which are intended to be adaptable (and acceptable) to a variety of worldwide audiences.

### **Does this affect the audiences of medieval films?**

To what degree does an audience see any of this? It is fine to argue that loaded aesthetic and political phenomena may drive the medieval film, but are these aesthetics and politics effectively communicated to those who view them, and – if so – do the viewers believe? Buffeted as they are by competing interpretations of the Middle Ages in school, entertainment and their daily lives, what do viewers integrate into their understanding? What do they reject? If filmgoers simply dismiss all they see in medieval films as the fanciful invention of filmmakers-as-entertainers rather than a valid source for historical information, then the medieval film should have little significance for scholars outside film studies. However, if these films do have an impact upon their viewers,

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<sup>26</sup> Some examples include: for the French, *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* (1928), for the Nazis, *Das Mädchen Johanna* (1935), for the Soviets, *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), for the Allies in World War II, *Henry V* (1944), for Franco’s Spain, *El Cid* (1961), and for Gamal Nasser’s Egypt, *El Naser Salah Ad Din* (1963).

<sup>27</sup> Examples include *The Crusades* (1935), *The Seventh Seal* (1957), *Braveheart* (1995), and *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005).

<sup>28</sup> This homogenisation is arguably a product of the culture of protest of Hollywood films in the 1980s and 1990s by special interest groups. Francis G. Couvares, ‘The Paradox of Protest: American Film, 1980-1992’, in *Movie Censorship and American Culture*, 2nd edn (Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), pp. 277-318.

and by extension on culture more broadly, then their visions and versions of history may be of large significance for educators and historians as well.

In sum, does the way in which the Middle Ages are depicted today (with an aesthetic and political ancestry that freely mixes the medieval, the medievalist and the hypermedieval) actually influence viewers' ideas about the period? This is the question that the rest of this thesis sets out to answer.

## Chapter 2: Theory and related research

Over the past decade, how film-makers interpret the Middle Ages has become the subject of a flurry of academic activity. Prior to 1988 the topic was largely neglected, but there is now significant regular output in the field. This chapter makes a critical survey of recent research on historical film, and especially on medieval film. It also explores some theoretical issues presented by the study of medieval film, and contextualises the contribution that this thesis aims to make. In the process, and in a search for similar work and applicable theories from other avenues of academic investigation, it reaches out to other relevant disciplines: education, psychology and sociology.

### The nascent field of 'medieval film' studies

Until a watershed forum was published in the *American Historical Review* in 1988, the depiction of the Middle Ages in film was mostly overlooked by academics.<sup>29</sup> This was largely due to the fact that hitherto historical films of *all* periods were largely ignored by academics in history and film studies. There were a few notable exceptions, which developed and employed a limited number of analytical approaches. Discussing historical films in general, Robert Brent Toplin observed that historians have only treated historical films

as a mirror that reflects the conscious and unconscious values of the producers and their audiences. Historians also have examined film and television in order to study the history of the entertainment industry and to understand film's role as an influence of public opinion and as an instrument of propaganda.<sup>30</sup>

Two foundational theoretical texts in this field are worth note: the collection *The Historian and Film* addressed aspects of the value of film to the historian, as historical evidence and as cultural artefact. It also introduced the idea that the visual media are important tools for the educator,

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<sup>29</sup> *The American Historical Review*, 93 (1988), 1173-1127.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Brent Toplin, 'The Filmmaker as Historian', *The American Historical Review*, 93 (1988), 1210-1227 (p. 1210).

both as a window into the past, and as a compelling way to reach students.<sup>31</sup> Also of note, Pierre Sorlin's *The Film in History* examined a cross-section of historical events and their filmic portrayals, and offers a critical introduction to the study of the historical film.<sup>32</sup> Sorlin argues that the historian's common tactic of analysing a film based on historical accuracy is misguided, saying

It must be said that this type of film is not an historical work: even if it appears to show the truth, it in no way claims to reproduce the past accurately. So I think that when professional historians wonder about the mistakes made in an historical film, they are worrying about a meaningless question. They would do better to concentrate on other problems.<sup>33</sup>

Instead, Sorlin examines historical films either aesthetically or as a window into the culture in which they were produced.

Studies before 1988 which specifically examined medieval films fall into two categories: either they presented an overview of the historical film genre (or one of its subgenres) into which medieval films fit, or were studies which criticised medieval film because of historical inaccuracy. Jeffrey Richards' examination of the swashbuckler genre, *Swordsmen of the Screen* was a noteworthy example of the former, especially chapter four 'When Knighthood was in Flower', which studies the figure of the knight in medieval film, and chapter eight 'Under the Greenwood Tree' which surveys Robin Hood (and Robin Hood-type) films in the context of their historical and literary forebears, as well as the time in which they were made.<sup>34</sup>

### **1988: A defining moment**

The recent uptick in the study of medieval film follows the increasing attention paid by historians to historical film generally. The special forum published in the *American Historical Review* in 1988 introduced many critical issues. Additionally, as the first major feature on the topic in a respected journal, the forum validated the historical fiction film as an object of serious consideration for

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<sup>31</sup> *The Historian and Film*, ed. by Paul Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

<sup>32</sup> Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).

<sup>33</sup> Sorlin, p. 21.

<sup>34</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *Swordsmen of the Screen: From Douglas Fairbanks to Michael York* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), pp. 72-144, 187-216.

historians. Five major essays were published there. In 'History in Images/History in Words', Robert Rosenstone outlined a new framework which treats historical fiction films as a new kind of 'postmodern history'. He then related this theory to his experience as historian and a filmmaker for *Reds* and *The Good Fight*.<sup>35</sup> Robert Brent Toplin's 'The Filmmaker as Historian' challenged the examination of historical film based upon historical accuracy or as a cultural artefact, and reinforced Rosenstone's view of the filmmaker's role as a postmodern historian.<sup>36</sup> In 'Historiography and Historiophoty', Hayden White applied postmodernist criticism of the search for historical 'truth' to the study of historical fiction film.<sup>37</sup> John O'Connor's 'History in Images/Images in History' focused upon the unique contributions a filmmaker acting as historian can make to the field of history, and asked broader questions about the use of film in historical discourses.<sup>38</sup> Finally, David Herlihy's 'Am I a Camera? Other Reflections on Films and History' explored some of the critical questions raised by Rosenstone's essay, and presented a framework for examining realist narratives in historical fiction film.<sup>39</sup> Robert Brent Toplin and Robert Rosenstone have remained at the forefront of the scholarship on the topic, and have since published a number of influential monographs.<sup>40</sup>

The work of this forum also signalled an important theoretical distinction from that which had been done previously. Some scholars begin treating historical fiction films not just aesthetically, or in (usually poor) comparison written history, but as a valid way of 'doing history' in its own right. These 'film histories' (distinct from 'historical films') have limitations and expectations that differ from textual histories which are dictated by their medium and genre (it

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<sup>35</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, 'History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History Onto Film', *The American Historical Review*, 93 (1988), 1173-1185.

<sup>36</sup> Toplin, 1210-1227.

<sup>37</sup> Hayden White, 'Historiography and Historiophoty', *The American Historical Review*, 93 (1988), 1193-1199.

<sup>38</sup> John E. O'Connor, 'History in Images/Images in History: Reflections on the Importance of Film and Television Study for an Understanding of the Past', *The American Historical Review*, 93 (1988), 1200-1209.

<sup>39</sup> David Herlihy, 'Am I a Camera? Other Reflections on Films and History', *The American Historical Review*, 93 (1988), 1186-1192.

<sup>40</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Harlow: Longman/Pearson, 2006); Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996); Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).



would be disingenuous to argue that textual histories are not limited by their medium or genre). However problematically, most of the subsequent discussion and debate has entailed winnowing down what can be considered a 'film history' into a limited canon.

### **Post-1988 discussions: what is a historical film?**

Many attempts have been made to subdivide the field of historical films, usually into a small corpus of 'good' films (defined by a variety of metrics) and a larger body of 'bad' ones. Fredric Jameson distinguished between historical film and 'nostalgia film', the latter of which is only focused on reproducing a 'surface sheen' of history rather than exploring historical issues. He argues this sort 'seeks to generate images and simulacra of the past, thereby [...] producing something like a pseudo-past for consumption'.<sup>41</sup> Pierre Sorlin distinguishes between 'historical' and 'costume' films, the latter being decried for being more focused on reproducing historical material culture as a backdrop than exploring social and cultural history.<sup>42</sup> Andrew Higson derides 'heritage' films along similar lines, as presenting history without political engagement.<sup>43</sup> Robert Brent Toplin differentiates between 'history films' and 'faction' films, where in the latter fictional characters live their lives amidst a backdrop of superficial historical events. He argues 'Faction cannot be truthful in its many small details. Our judgments of it must point, instead, to questions about a film's potential for delivering larger truths in sophisticated ways'.<sup>44</sup>

In his 1988 article and subsequent work, Robert Rosenstone strictly limits his classification of 'postmodern history', excluding 'mainstream' and 'standard' films – the ones that most people see – and focusing only on 'experimental' or 'postmodern' films, or films lauded as 'innovative' during their time as objects of study, such as *Reds* (1981), *JFK* (1991), *Walker* (1987) or *October*

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<sup>41</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 137.

<sup>42</sup> Sorlin, pp. 116, 144.

<sup>43</sup> Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 113.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Brent Toplin, 'Hollywood's D-Day From the Perspective of the 1960s and the 1990s: The Longest Day and Saving Private Ryan', *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies*, 36 (2006), 25-29 (p. 29).

(1917).<sup>45</sup> Correspondingly, the greater part of public interaction with the past through film has hitherto been ignored by most academics.

In what follows, historical film is defined differently. A historical film is defined here as any film which causes a person to imagine the past, and as a result, to learn about it. Whether the imagining produced is accurate or the knowledge gleaned truthful is immaterial; the history film is defined by its function alone. In result, the definition used here is based upon the experience of the audience rather than the critic's perception of what makes something a 'history'. Provocatively, this definition may include some fantasy films which are set in something that is recognisably, if only indistinctly, historical in setting. However, to what degree historical fantasy films cause the above effect is unknown; exploring this issue is one of the fundamental parts of the thesis. To what degree can historical fantasy be considered history?

### **Medievalists and theorists on medieval film**

After *The American Historical Review's* forum, medieval films began to be addressed by medievalists. While most journals embracing medieval studies – *Speculum* is an example – have yet to include essays on film, there have been a number of articles on the topic in other specialist journals. Most notable are *Film and History* and *Studies in Medievalism*. *Film and History* dedicated two issues to the topic of medieval cinema, and occasionally publishes film reviews on medieval films.<sup>46</sup> The 2003 issue of *Studies in Medievalism* entitled 'Film & Fiction: Reviewing the Middle Ages' also focused on the topic.

Journals like *Cineaste*, *Cinema Journal* and *Film History* occasionally publish articles about medieval film. Examples are Tony Pipolo's comparative study of the aesthetics of Joan of Arc films

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<sup>45</sup> Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, pp. 83-151; Rosenstone, *History on Film*, pp. 50-69.

<sup>46</sup> Particularly notable in the two issues of *Film and History* dedicated to medieval film are articles by Martha Driver and David J. Williams. See: *Film and History* 29:1-2 (1999), pp. 1-70; and *Film and History* 29:3-4 (1999), pp. 1-65; especially: Martha Driver, 'Special Introduction: Writing About Medieval Movies: Authenticity and History', *Film and History* 29:1-2 (1999), pp. 5-7; and David J. Williams, 'Looking at the Middle Ages in the Cinema: An Overview', *Film and History* 29:1-2 (1999), pp. 8-19.

and Greta Austin's polemic on medieval film's typical lack of historical accuracy.<sup>47</sup> Aside from these, most such articles review individual medieval films aesthetically or as part of an *auteur's oeuvre*.

The fundamental theoretical split between the study of medieval films by medievalists and by film scholars centres on the question of genre and corpus. Scholars of film studies do not usually regard medieval films as a distinct corpus or genre worthy of study in its own right, whereas medievalists generally do. It is understandable that film studies scholars would not see medieval films as a discrete genre, for the medieval film is not a genre in the typical sense. As Rick Altman writes in *Film/Genre*, there are four 'meanings' of film genre, which he defines as follows:

- genre as *blueprint*, as a formula that precedes, programmes and patterns industry production;
- genre as *structure*, as the formal framework on which individual films are founded
- genre as *label*, as the name of a category central to the decisions and communications of distributors and exhibitors;
- genre as *contract*, as the viewing position required by each genre film of its audience.<sup>48</sup>

The category 'medieval film' does none of these things. Instead of being a genre, it is a *generic modifier*. A medieval epic like *Braveheart* (1995) usually has more in common with a Greco-Roman epic like *300* (2006) than with a medieval noir like *The Name of the Rose* (1986) or medieval comedy like *Black Knight* (2001).<sup>49</sup> This setting can bring with it many topoi, stock characters, memes and tropes, but not enough to develop into a coherent genre by any of Altman's definitions. It is also understandable that medievalists would regard medieval films as worthy of study as a corpus, but so far no-one active in this field has been able to define the limits of that genre or corpus, or why it should deserve special interest.

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<sup>47</sup> Tony Pipolo, 'Joan of Arc: The Cinema's Immortal Maid', *Cineaste: America's Leading Magazine on the Art and Politics of the Cinema*, 25 (2000), 16-21; Greta Austin, 'Were the Peasants Really So Clean? The Middle Ages in Film', *Film History*, 14 (2002), 136-141.

<sup>48</sup> Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), p. 14.

<sup>49</sup> Gibson; Snyder; Jean-Jacques Annaud, *The Name Of The Rose* (20th Century Fox, 1986); Gil Junger, *Black Knight* (20th Century Fox, 2001).

### What is 'medieval' in 'medieval film'?

Medievalists who discuss historical film generally fall into one of two camps. There are those who, within the discipline of History, examine medieval films along the lines of pre-1988 paradigms – that is, as cultural artefact, as teaching tool, or as historical evidence (occasionally reverting to 'historical accuracy' critiques). Examples are John Aberth's *A Knight at the Movies*, which analyses a large number of films as cultural artefacts and for their historical accuracy.<sup>50</sup>

The other tendency draws on literary study and examines films thematically. Kevin Harty's 1999 monograph *The Reel Middle Ages* is a catalogue of films which depict the Middle Ages, providing production details and important review citations.<sup>51</sup> Though this is useful as a tool, it provides little analysis and the summaries are often based upon the author's opinions of the merits of the film. The most cohesive branch of the literary-based examination of medieval film has focussed on adaptations of Arthurian literature. This is perhaps strange, since, as Williams notes, 'The Arthurian legends establish themselves in film with surprising slowness', having first appeared on screen only in the 1940s.<sup>52</sup> For example, Susan Aronstein examines the Americanization of the Arthurian legend in film in *Hollywood Knights*.<sup>53</sup> In addition, Harty has recently published two collections of essays which also explore filmic adaptations of Arthuriana.<sup>54</sup>

The other branch of medieval literature-based examinations of medieval film comprises studies by scholars who use theory-based methodologies (though many Arthurians are highly theoretical as well). Their work usually addresses a single film or a small corpus in the light of a theory they find apt; this school of thought has been dominant in recent years. Queer theory provides the focus in *Queer Movie Medievalisms. Race, Class and Gender in 'Medieval' Cinema*

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<sup>50</sup> John Aberth, *A Knight at the Movies: Medieval History on Film* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>51</sup> Harty.

<sup>52</sup> David J. Williams, 'Medieval Movies', *Yearbook of English Studies* 20 (1990), p. 11.

<sup>53</sup> Susan Aronstein, *Hollywood Knights: Arthurian Cinema and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>54</sup> Kevin J. Harty, *King Arthur on Film: New Essays on Arthurian Cinema* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999); Kevin J. Harty, *Cinema Arthuriana: Twenty Essays*, 2nd edn (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002).

adds postcolonial, Marxist and feminist dialogues to the queer.<sup>55</sup> Nickolas Haydock's *Movie Medievalism* uses Lacanian psychoanalysis and Deleuze's theory of the time-image to analyse seven medieval films.<sup>56</sup> Much of *Hollywood in the Holy Land* engages with postcolonial discourses (especially using Edward Said's *Orientalism* and its antecedents).<sup>57</sup> The recent *Medieval Film* employs a variety of postmodern theories, all focusing on 'uncertain temporality'.<sup>58</sup>

Some of these literary/theoretical studies do not restrict the label 'medieval' to films which depict the Middle Ages (or fictionalised versions thereof), but often include films which have a medieval 'flavour', and use medieval themes and tropes in non-medieval settings. For example, many scholars consider the original *Star Wars* trilogy as a neo-Arthurian romance.<sup>59</sup> Many works have also explored the fantasy genre (popular in the 1980s and enjoying a renaissance after the success of *The Lord of the Rings* films) as thematically 'medieval'. Some have pushed this search for thematic resonance even further. For example, *The Medieval Hero on Screen: Representations from Beowulf to Buffy* includes chapters which discover the medieval in such suspect locations as *E.T.*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Dirty Harry*.<sup>60</sup> A recent paper at the International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo found the medieval in *Sex in the City*, and sessions regularly occur on *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>61</sup>

This quest for medieval resonances risks generalising 'medieval film' (or medievalism) until the category is so broad as to be meaningless, or absurd. It is arguable that some of these 'medieval' themes or resonances are a product of the scholar, rather than a result of the

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<sup>55</sup> *Queer Movie Medievalisms*, ed. by Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Tison Pugh (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); *Race, Class, and Gender in 'Medieval' Cinema*, ed. by Lynn Tarte Ramey and Tison Pugh, *New Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>56</sup> Nickolas Haydock, *Movie Medievalism* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008).

<sup>57</sup> *Hollywood in the Holy Land: Essays on Film Depictions of the Crusades and Christian-Muslim Clashes*, ed. by Nickolas Haydock and Edward L. Ridsen (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009).

<sup>58</sup> *Medieval Film*, ed. by Anke Bernau and Bettina Bildhauer (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 2.

<sup>59</sup> Robert G. Collins, 'Star Wars: The Pastiche of Myth and the Yearning for a Past Future', *Journal of Popular Culture*, XI (1977), 1-10; 'Medieval Romance and Science Fiction: The Anatomy of a Resemblance', *Journal of Popular Culture*, XVI (1982), 15-26; *The Medieval Hero on Screen: Representations from Beowulf to Buffy*, ed. by Martha W. Driver and Sid Ray (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), p. 240.

<sup>60</sup> Driver and Ray, pp. 73-90, 133-144, 156-164.

<sup>61</sup> Julie Nelson Couch, "'I couldn't help but wonder...': Sex and the City a Medieval Romance?'" (presented at the International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, MI, 2010).

creator(s)'s intent or the mainstream audience's interpretation. Maslow's Law of the Instrument – 'It is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail' – may apply here.<sup>62</sup> The implications of this give rise to problems and assumptions in the scholarship. This can cause overexpansion of the 'medieval' category, and the misidentification of a trope as specific to the medieval film where it is not. However, the most fundamental problem is an assumption that gives these works a reason to exist: the 'medieval' film is in some way special, which justifies the special attention given. The medieval film *is* special, but only because of the feature which gives it its name: it depicts the Middle Ages or something which is recognisably medieval by the viewer and is interpreted in conjunction with their understandings about that period.

In their introduction to the recent collection *Medieval Film*, Bildhauer and Bernau explore the idea that trying to define 'medieval film' either generically or thematically results in equally unsatisfactory conclusions. They argue:

Both the generic and the thematic definitions have obvious limitations and undermine each other, raising the question of the usefulness of such a free-floating term as medieval film. Medieval films have not developed coherent genre conventions: unlike western or horror films, they can share the characteristics of these genres and others. Yet defining medieval films solely by their setting, as those whose plot takes place at a time between, say, AD 500 and 1500, would result in the exclusion of a large number of films which are based on medieval stories; set in a fantastic Middle Ages; or set in a time before 500 or after 1500, but none the less consistently identified as medieval by film-makers, promoters, critics and audiences. The latter observation might imply the usefulness of classifying medieval films as those which are *perceived* to be medieval films by individual recipients or producers, but this still would leave the question open as to which features of the films lead to such perceptions.<sup>63</sup>

They then turn away from this observation toward critical theory:

We therefore suggest a third, theoretical definition of medieval films: as those characterized precisely by their uncertain temporality.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Abraham H. Maslow, *The Psychology of Science: A Reconnaissance*, The John Dewey Society Lectureship Series, no. 8 (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 15.

<sup>63</sup> Bernau and Bildhauer, p. 2.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

As the editors continue, the advantage of this method enables ‘a more nuanced approach’, which ‘makes possible a move away from the frequent critical dismissal of medieval film’ by ‘emphasising their relevance for film studies’.<sup>65</sup> Admirable though those goals are, they are more political than scholarly. Additionally their arguments quickly become dense and convoluted. The ‘uncertain temporality’ they use to define medieval films as unique is not sufficient. A definition resting on ‘uncertain temporality’ is just another attempt to define medieval film as a genre by establishing this as its central trope, the only difference being that in this case the trope is highly theorised. To the authors, this temporality manifests as memes which predominate in medieval films, like time travel, flashback, anachronism, ahistorical ‘romance time’ and period pastiche. To a degree they are right; for example, the Middle Ages as a destination (or far less often, an origin) for time travel is common in film (ex. *Time Bandits* (1981), *The Navigator: A Mediaeval Odyssey* (1988), *Bill & Ted’s Excellent Adventure* (1989) or *Timeline* (2003)).<sup>66</sup> However, there are many films which use time-travel (or other ‘uncertain temporalities’) that are not at all medieval (e.g. *The Time Machine* (1960), *Planet of the Apes* (1968), *Back to the Future* (1985), or many iterations of *Star Trek*).<sup>67</sup> Additionally, many medieval films do not incorporate time travel or other ‘uncertain temporality’.

This relationship between temporality and the Middle Ages is not a feature of the period or the filmic genre on a theoretical level, but more likely grew out of the *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* tradition of time travel to the Middle Ages in literature and popular culture. The fact that the Middle Ages is a comfortable distance from daily life and modernity allows it to be appropriated as a setting for fantasy, a tendency that itself originates in the structure of medieval romance which foregrounds action over specificity of time and place. Therefore, the only

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Terry Gilliam, *Time Bandits* (HandMade Films, 1981); Vincent Ward, *The Navigator: A Mediaeval Odyssey* (Arenafilm, 1988); *Bill & Ted’s Excellent Adventure* (MGM, 1989); Richard Donner, *Timeline* (Paramount, 2003).

<sup>67</sup> George Pal, *The Time Machine* (MGM, 1960); Franklin J. Schaffner, *Planet of the Apes* (20th Century Fox, 1968); Leonard Nimoy, *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (Paramount, 1986); Robert Zemeckis, *Back to the Future* (Universal Studios, 1985).

reason which remains as to why medieval films are unique—in Bernau and Bildhauer’s book—is because they are the films examined by the medievalist authors.

This is not to say that films which depict the Middle Ages (or fantasy visions of it) are not worthy of study; in fact, they are. But the aspect which makes them unique objects of study for medievalists is simple: people see them as medieval, and as a result they contribute to the body of received knowledge of the period. The initial argument made by Bildhauer and Bernau before the overtly theoretical continuation, elegantly lays out the need for the present thesis:

The latter observation might imply the usefulness of classifying medieval films as those which are *perceived* to be medieval films by individual recipients or producers, but this still would leave the question open as to which features of the films lead to such perceptions.<sup>68</sup>

I agree. The best way to classify medieval film is as those which are perceived by their producers and/or audiences as recognisably ‘medieval’. The speed with which Bildhauer and Bernau turn away from this proposed avenue of research seems to imply that it is impossible; in fact, it is not. It is difficult, and requires active and vigorous engagement with both audiences and filmmakers. Moreover, whereas previous explorations of medieval film have been rooted in aesthetics, history and critical theory, research which follows this new line of investigation must be rooted in sociology, psychology and educational theory.

Bernau and Bildhauer’s unintentional call-to-arms deserves to be broadened. They ask ‘which features of the films lead to such perceptions [of medievalness]?’ The answer surely rests in a culturally-defined popular understanding of what the Middle Ages are. Rather than limiting the focus only to film, their statement begs the question: ‘what do individuals identify as “medieval”?’ Only when that question has been answered can we proceed to ask ‘what causes them to apply the label “medieval” to a film?’ and hence ‘what features of a film causes it to be recognisably “medieval” to its audience?’. The goal of this thesis is thus to examine what features lead to the perception of ‘medievalness’ by consumers of film, and the recursive effects that this perception has upon their understanding of what ‘medieval’ means. Any film which is perceived to

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<sup>68</sup> Bernau and Bildhauer, p. 2.



be medieval by its viewership has the potential to contribute to the public understanding of the Middle Ages and thus acts as one of Rosenstone's postmodern histories. If a film is not understood to be 'medieval', then no matter what sources, analogues or resonances it may have with the Middle Ages, in terms of the public's interaction with the past, it is irrelevant. Furthermore, the more popular a piece of cinema, the more potential it has to contribute to this public understanding.

A single thesis is too limited in span to explore the question fully, as the consuming public is comprised of a legion of individuals, each with their own perspective. That said, I posit that the contemporary reception of medievalisms is one of the central questions in both medievalism studies and medieval studies today. Since no study has yet been done which satisfactorily explores the public understanding of the Middle Ages, this thesis opens new lines of inquiry. It focuses on the audiences of medieval films rather than the producers (though the producers form a group ripe for future study) as a way of exploring the effect these films have upon those who watch them, and the possible theoretical (especially public-educational) implications that this effect may have. As part of this, this thesis also sets out to investigate what the public understanding of the Middle Ages entails.

### **Quest for theory**

For reasons given, no study of this kind has yet been done in the field of medieval studies. As a result, I have looked to adjacent fields for similar research and relevant theory. A few cognate studies have been published by researchers in sociology, psychology, cultural studies and education; each with different goals, methods and theoretical frameworks. This section will briefly survey these studies, their theoretical underpinnings and implications. Additionally, differences between the research undertaken in this thesis and in these other studies will be explored.

The research problem that has been set out has two interrelated halves. On one hand, it requires an examination of 'the Middle Ages' as it exists as a concept, held by individuals. As a

result, this study relies upon learning theory, particularly schema theory, as a way of explaining how abstract concepts like ‘the Middle Ages’ are understood, used and modified. The second issue requires an understanding of how media consumers interpret what they see on screen and intercalate it with their existing knowledge. This relies upon the groundwork done by Stuart Hall and his ‘encoding/decoding’ paradigm.<sup>69</sup>

### **Schema theories**

‘The Middle Ages’ is a difficult abstract concept. Though it is rich in connotations and associations, no-one can point to an object like a ball or cat and say ‘*that* is the Middle Ages’. Leaving aside the fact that scholars themselves cannot agree upon the boundaries of ‘the Middle Ages’ (more on this later), the collective noun evokes an idea that is abstract, intangible and amorphous. As a result, the best way to understand the idea of the Middle Ages is, primarily, as a schema. Schema (pl. ‘schemata’ or occas. ‘schemas’), to an educational or psychological theorist, comprise the collection of tacit knowledge and experience acquired by an individual on a particular topic over the years, be it practical, theoretical or historical.<sup>70</sup> Brewer and Nakamura define schemata thus: ‘In brief, they are higher-order cognitive structures that have been hypothesized to underlie many aspects of human knowledge and skill. They serve a crucial role in providing an account of how old knowledge interacts with new knowledge in perception, language, thought and memory’.<sup>71</sup> They are the conceptual scaffolding formed by conclusions drawn from previous experience and through which future experiences are understood. Everyone has schemata about everything, some practical (‘how to operate a toaster’), some abstract – ‘the past’.

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<sup>69</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘Encoding/Decoding’, in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*, ed. by Stuart Hall (London: Hutchinson in association with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1980), pp. 128-138.

<sup>70</sup> Richard A. Anderson, ‘The Notion of Schemata and the Educational Enterprise: General Discussion of the Conference’, in *Schooling and the Acquisition of Knowledge*, ed. by Richard C Anderson, Rand J. Spiro and William Edward Montague (London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1977), pp. 415-431 (pp. 418-419).

<sup>71</sup> William F. Brewer and Glenn V. Nakamura, ‘The Nature and Functions of Schemas’, in *Handbook of Social Cognition*, ed. by Thomas K. Srull and Robert S. Wyer (Hillsdale, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1984), pp. 119-160 (p. 123).

‘The Middle Ages’, and its adjectival cousin ‘medieval’, are abstract schemata. The word was first used in the modern sense by Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*:

Indeed it is schemata, not images of objects, which underlie our pure sensible concepts. No image could ever be adequate to the concept of a triangle in general. It would never attain that universality of the concept which renders it valid of all triangles [...] The concept ‘dog’ signifies a rule according to which my imagination can delineate the figure of a four-footed animal in a general manner, without limitation to any single determinate figure such as experience, or any possible image that I can represent *in concreto*, actually presents.<sup>72</sup>

Schema theory was first developed by Sir Frederic C. Bartlett in his book *Remembering*.<sup>73</sup> The theory has since been greatly expanded by the work of Richard A. Anderson and others.<sup>74</sup> As a short summary of the theory, David Rumelhart and Andrew Ortony outline what they call the ‘four essential characteristics of schemata’: To begin with, ‘Schemata have variables’. For example, a ‘ball’ can be red, or blue, large or small, soft or hard. Secondly, ‘Schemata can embed one within the other’. This means that the schema ‘football’ is nested conceptually in the ‘ball’ or ‘sporting equipment’ super-schema. Thirdly, ‘Schemata represent generic concepts which, taken all together, vary in their levels of abstraction’. This means that, as stated above, there are schemata for all concepts whether abstract or concrete. Finally, ‘Schemata represent knowledge, rather than definitions.’<sup>75</sup> This means that schemata are conceptually flexible; they can be adapted according to context in a way that a purely-definitional model could not.

Though schemata exist at all levels of abstraction, according to Rumelhart and Ortony, ‘previous works have concentrated on representing the internal structure of, at most, lexical terms. Not until very recently have attempts been made to represent conceptualisations at more

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<sup>72</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Norman Kemp Smith and Gary Banham, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 182-3.

<sup>73</sup> Frederic C. Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932).

<sup>74</sup> *Schooling and the Acquisition of Knowledge*, ed. by Richard C Anderson, Rand J. Spiro and William Edward Montague (London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1977); Anderson, pp. 415-431; David E. Rumelhart and Andrew Ortony, ‘Representation of Knowledge in Memory’, in *Schooling and the Acquisition of Knowledge*, ed. by Richard C Anderson, Rand J. Spiro and William Edward Montague (London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1977), pp. 99-135.

<sup>75</sup> Rumelhart and Ortony, pp. 99-135 (p. 101).

abstract levels'.<sup>76</sup> Anderson emphasises the importance of exploration of abstract schemata: 'It is by virtue of being abstract that schemata allow us to make sense of a range of situations'.<sup>77</sup> The schema 'the Middle Ages' and its component parts represent knowledge in many forms and at a variety of levels of abstraction. This knowledge can employ different senses, for example sight ('what a knight looks like'), or sound ('what medieval music sounds like'). The knowledge can be intellectual ('when were the Middle Ages?'), archetypal ('what a medieval King is like'), empathetic ('what was it like to live in the Middle Ages?') or moral ('were the Middle Ages good or bad?'). When exploring what public understanding of the Middle Ages entails, it is accordingly important to be both aware of and to explore this multiplicity of information.

Schema often have other schemata embedded within them, the component schemata being called *subschemata*. Each subschema works as a building component of its *dominating schema*, defining what it is (and is not). As Rumelhart and Ortony explain, 'In much the same way as the entries for lexical items in a dictionary consist of other lexical items, so the structure of the schema is given in terms of relationships amongst other schemata'.<sup>78</sup> For example, 'Robin Hood' is one subschema of 'the Middle Ages'. Some subschemata integral to the 'Robin Hood' schema are 'longbow', 'robs from the rich and gives to the poor' and 'Sherwood Forest'. Some subschemata are requisite, some optional and some counter to the dominating schema of which they are a part. For example, for the schema 'woman's face', the component schema 'mouth' is requisite; if it does not have a mouth it is either not a face or not a human face. For 'woman's face', the schema 'glasses' is optional, meaning a face can still be a face with or without glasses, and that the object in question does not cause contradictions or confusions if included. The schema 'beard', on the other hand, is, for most, antithetical to the schema 'woman's face' and can cause some confusion. As Rumelhart explains, 'A schema contains, as part of its specification, the network of interrelations that is believed to generally hold among the constituents of the concept in question.

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<sup>76</sup> Rumelhart and Ortony, pp. 99-135 (p. 109).

<sup>77</sup> Anderson, pp. 415-431 (p. 421).

<sup>78</sup> Rumelhart and Ortony, pp. 99-135 (p. 106).

Schemata, in some sense, represent stereotypes of these concepts'.<sup>79</sup> This study will begin to survey the common structures of the schema of 'the Middle Ages' as it exists in the public consciousness, its components and its network of interrelations.

The process of learning is one of conflict, comparison and compromise. As Robert Axelrod asserts, 'When new information becomes available, a person tries to fit the information into the pattern which he has used in the past [...] If the new information does not fit very well, something has to give.'<sup>80</sup> In the 'received knowledge' paradigm of the process of learning, old patterns are revised to accommodate new data. However, often it is not the old system which gives way; new information can be regarded as an 'exception to the rule' or discredited due to previous experience. Most insidiously, over time new information can be misremembered to fit already-established patterns. Established schemata have an intellectual inertia which can only be overcome by repeated conflict and gradual revision.

As individuals gain experience, their schemata develop to include more variables and specificity. To most, learning about 'the Middle Ages' and 'medieval' may have been done from children's books, family trips to historical sites, films, school, fantasy novels, advertisements, popular culture, or any number of other personal experiences. While schooling plays a part, it is important not to exaggerate its role in the overall process.

### **Relevant similar research in other fields**

It is in the field of education that work on the topic of public interaction with historical fiction films has been most productive. A few studies have been done which analyse audience interpretation of film within the context of the classroom; these relate to the much larger field within education that focuses on the pedagogical benefits (and dangers) of using film to teach history. Notable

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<sup>79</sup> David E. Rumelhart, 'Schemata: The Building Blocks of Cognition', in *Theoretical Issues in Reading Comprehension: Perspectives from Cognitive Psychology, Linguistics, Artificial Intelligence and Education*, ed. by Rand J. Spiro, Bertram C. Bruce and William F. Brewer (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1980), p. 34.

<sup>80</sup> Robert Axelrod, 'Schema Theory: An Information Processing Model of Perception and Cognition', *The American Political Science Review*, 67 (1973), 1248-1266 (p. 1248).

examples are 'Confronting History's Interpretive Paradox While Teaching Fifth Graders to Investigate the Past' by Bruce Van Sledright, Alan Marcus' "'It Is as It Was": Feature Film in the History Classroom', and "'It Makes You Think More When You Watch Things": Scaffolding for Historical Inquiry Using Film in the Middle School Classroom'.<sup>81</sup>

While each makes its own contribution, overall the studies reinforce the idea that historical fiction film is a useful educational tool, but only when complemented by context and scaffolding. If a teacher does not provide this, films shown in the classroom environment gain validation which can increase students' acceptance of the skewed version of history these films often present. In 2009 a project that involved students watching historical films while studying associated primary source texts was undertaken in the memory lab at the department of Psychology at Washington University, St. Louis.<sup>82</sup> As project leader Andrew Butler notes,

Watching a film clip increased correct recall of consistent information relative to recall of the same information when subjects did not see the clip. However, when the information in the film contradicted the text, subjects often (falsely) recalled misinformation from the film.<sup>83</sup>

The rate of the recall of misinformation reaches 50%, and is most prevalent when students were either not warned about the historical inaccuracies, or only given a general warning that the film was historically inaccurate. The only occasion in which students consistently fared better was when the teacher specifically pointed out those sections of the film that were inaccurate.<sup>84</sup> The approach used in this thesis differs from these significantly. In writing about how school children acquire historical understandings from the media, educational researchers Alan Marcus, Richard Paxton and Peter Myerson postulated that: 'While the written word predominates in how adult

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<sup>81</sup> Alan S. Marcus, "'It Is as It Was": Feature Film in the History Classroom', *The Social Studies*, 96 (2005), 61-67; Bruce VanSledright, 'Confronting History's Interpretive Paradox While Teaching Fifth Graders to Investigate the Past', *American Educational Research Journal*, 39 (2002), 1089-1115; Adam Woelders, "'It Makes You Think More When You Watch Things": Scaffolding for Historical Inquiry Using Film in the Middle School Classroom', *Social Studies*, 98 (2007), 145-152.

<sup>82</sup> Andrew C. Butler and others, 'Using Popular Films to Enhance Classroom Learning: The Good, the Bad, and the Interesting', *Psychological Science*, 20 (2009), 1161-1168.

<sup>83</sup> Andrew C. Butler and others, 1161-1168 (p. 1161).

<sup>84</sup> Andrew C. Butler and others, 1161-1168 (pp. 1164-1165).

historians think about the past, the same may not be the case for K-12 students'.<sup>85</sup> Their claim deserves to be emboldened. Some *historians* may think about history primarily in terms of written text, as textual enquiry has been the mainstay of the discipline since it began – but do adult non-historians think similarly? There does not seem to be any indication that the written word dominates how adult non-historians think about the past any more than it does in children. The present study accordingly uses adults as its focus rather than children. A study that compares adults' and children's interaction with historical fiction film is required, but lies beyond the scope of this thesis.

Educational researchers focus primarily on the effects of watching films in the classroom. This thesis differs by examining the consumption of historical films outside this context. These films are most often viewed in the cinema or at home, not only well removed from a teacher's influence but in the free time that is differentiated from that of formal learning. As a result the present research has broader implications for the study of the power of historical film in the public sphere. Finally, existing studies almost exclusively use Americans as their subjects, and show films depicting American history. The present thesis focuses instead on British interaction with medieval history. While previous studies have focused on the question of whether students learn from films and how this learning compares with what they are taught in class, this study – in contrast – has a broader scope, seeking to ascertain the public understanding of the past and its interaction with historical film outside the judgemental framework of whether the film 'got history right'. Though this way of judging responses may arise, it is not my central mode of analysis or purpose.

### ***The Presence of the Past***

The research most comparable to that undertaken by this thesis, and which forms part of the theoretical groundwork used here, is a study conducted by Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen in the late 1990s. This was a quantitative national survey of approximately 1,000 Americans of

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<sup>85</sup> Alan S. Marcus, Richard J. Paxton and Peter Meyerson, "'The Reality of It All': History Students Read the Movies', *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 34 (2006), 516-552 (p. 517).

different ages, genders and ethnic backgrounds.<sup>86</sup> The overall purpose was to explore the myriad ways that modern Americans interact with their past: through conversations with relatives, trips to museums, reading books, attending classes and/or watching films and TV programmes about history. The researchers recorded how often the respondents engaged in those activities, how connected they felt to the past, and how much importance they assigned to a variety of different kinds of 'pasts' (for instance, national, familial, ethnic). The results were published in the book *The Presence of the Past*. That study is important as the first comprehensive exploration of public understanding of, and interaction with, the past, and its implications inform the basis of this thesis. The results apply both specifically to the public's interaction with historical TV and film, but also their interaction with history on a personal level. However, the results of this survey are specific to American interactions with the American past—applying the results of this study to the current question – the British interaction with the medieval past – demands some rethinking. While in some ways the British may interact with their past similarly, it is important not to assume that they do so without evidence.

One of the questions asked in *The Presence of the Past* survey was: 'Knowing about the past of which of the following four areas or groups is most important to you: the past of your family, the past of your racial or ethnic group, the past of the community in which you now live, or the past of the United States?'. 'Your family' was rated the most important by 66% of the participants. 'National past' ranked second at 22%, 'racial/ethnic past' at 8% and 'community past' at 4%. This indicates that these respondents connect most readily to what they perceive as their own personal heritage and genealogy. The Middle Ages does not neatly fit into these categories, since most cannot trace their family history back that far, and even if they claim medieval ancestry, do those claims offer most Britons anything other than personal trivia? In the UK, the Middle Ages may be considered a part of national, ethnic or community pasts (no matter whether those

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<sup>86</sup> Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). Though this survey was primarily quantitative in nature, the researchers also integrated elements of qualitative methods into their research. While the majority of the questions only allowed respondents to answer according to a predetermined rubric, some questions allowed for freer responses.



connections are tenuous or not), but it is unknown to what degree the British public actively engages with its medieval past in this way.

The Middle Ages are understood by many medievalists to be the time when the idea of nation and national identity was being formed. The English National Curriculum explicitly teaches the Middle Ages within a national context (to be explored further in chapter 7). This is further complicated by the fact that there are four (or five) different national identities comprising the UK: English, Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish (itself a matter of multiple identities), and for some, Cornish.<sup>87</sup> This complex tapestry may make the British historical understanding based upon nation more complex than the American, and deserves further study.

### **Race through time**

Those respondents in the *Presence of the Past* survey who self-identified as 'white' were markedly less interested in their racial/ethnic history than those who self-identified as part of a minority ethnic group. Only 4% of whites said that their ethnic history is the most important. Comparably, 26% of African-Americans, 10% of Mexican Americans and 38% of the Pine Ridge Oglala Sioux Native American tribe said racial/ethnic history was most important.<sup>88</sup> This is possibly due to the fact that whites, as the most populous segment are less inclined to feel this criterion is a defining feature. Additionally, this is possibly due to the fact that an interest in ethnic heritage for whites has long been associated with white supremacy movements; though it is socially acceptable for African-Americans or Mexican-Americans to have pride in their ethnic heritage, for whites it can bear the blemish of association with the history of racism.

So, can it be assumed that the British public have similar engagement with the Middle Ages in terms of their racial or ethnic past? The European Middle Ages were nowhere near as racially heterogeneous or cosmopolitan as we are today, and interactions between races and

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<sup>87</sup> One might add a further category, of undifferentiated 'Celtic', in contradistinction to 'English'.

<sup>88</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelen, p. 237.

cultures were notoriously problematic.<sup>89</sup> But in recent years, the media has presented a version of the legendary British Middle Ages in which the ethnic diversity of modern Britain is projected back into its past. In the ITV series *Robin of Sherwood*, the 1991 film *Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves*, and the recent BBC series *Robin Hood*, one of the merry men is depicted as a Muslim, either African or Arab. The last two adaptations of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court: A Knight in Camelot* (1998) and *Black Knight* (2001) have sent African-American protagonists back to King Arthur's court. There they encounter only brief, comic conflicts over their race; these are quickly brushed aside as their worth is proven. Even stranger, in the recent BBC series *Merlin*, Camelot is depicted as a racially diverse society and Guinevere is a black scullery maid, which, considering Arthur is a blond-haired blue-eyed prince, simultaneously elicits tension about cross-class and interracial relationships. However, while the class tension is consistently explored as a complicating device, her ethnicity is never addressed as extraordinary. It is possible that this was the result of a colour-blind casting process (although Guinevere's father is also black, so the potentially colour-blind casting does not break genetic racial bounds). However, by doing this, the show projects an image of an ethnically-diverse and racially tolerant Britain backwards onto the Middle Ages, overlooking the ethnic and racial conflicts of the past. Similarly, the recent film *Kingdom of Heaven* dealt with religious, cultural and ethnic conflicts as well, with a more realistic view of the Muslims who opposed the crusaders. However, this film has its own share of problematic depictions of race, religion and ethnicity, and these will be explored in chapters 6 and 8.

This is significantly different with how ethnicity in the Middle Ages has been interpreted in previous centuries. Gone are the days when ethnic labels 'Saxon' and 'Norman' held great political power as a signifier of identity. These terms were frequently used in popular and political discourses during the nineteenth century both in the US and in Britain. In antebellum America, as William Robert Taylor recounts,

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<sup>89</sup> Recent volumes include: *Race and Ethnicity in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Thomas Hahn, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 1 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

contemporaries generally settled upon some such distinction as ‘Saxon’ or ‘Anglo-Saxon’ for the North and ‘Norman’ for the South [...] It was commonly felt, furthermore, that these two ways of life had been steadily diverging since colonial times, and there were many after 1861 who believed that these characteristic differences between North and South had brought on the Civil War.<sup>90</sup>

Furthermore, this intellectual racial medievalism manifested, in the South, as an adoption of Sir Walter Scott’s ‘medieval’ novels. These novels provided an historical ancestor for themselves and justification for slavery:

In southern eyes, Scott’s courageous and honourable feudal lords and Scottish chiefs had been reborn in the nineteenth century in the form of the plantation aristocrat. The planter’s slaves, like the medieval lord’s serfs, were necessary to nurture the flowering of the region’s aristocratic society.<sup>91</sup>

The power held by these terms has all but vanished in the twenty-first century. After Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*, as Stephen Thomas Knight argues,

a major new feature emerges in Robin Hood’s mythic biography: he is quintessentially, racially, English, and proves this by his hostility to the Norman French. This idea stems from the “Norman Yoke” theory of history, popular from the seventeenth century onward, arguing that a relatively free, prosperous Anglo-Saxon peasantry was cowed into impoverished serfdom by the military triumph of the Normans in 1066.<sup>92</sup>

None of the film or TV adaptations after 1990 make anything more than passing mention of this trope, which had been part of Robin Hood since Scott. *King Arthur* (2004) reverses the usual racial paradigm and vilifies the Anglo-Saxons as barbaric invaders. This recoil from using race as a defining feature in the Middle Ages may be in part due to a recent turn in Britain away from using ethnic identity amongst many whites. Racial heritage is a tactic of division used by far-right wing groups like the British National Party, who have attempted to use historical ethnic heritage to assert their identity as the ‘indigenous’ Britons and therefore rightful owners of the country. They use this rhetoric to set themselves against recent immigration on this spurious historical basis.

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<sup>90</sup> William Robert Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 15.

<sup>91</sup> Ritchie Devon Watson, *Normans and Saxons: Southern Race Mythology and the Intellectual History of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2008), p. 48.

<sup>92</sup> Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 111.

However, the BNP define their racial heritage further back than even the Victorian 'Saxon/Norman' taxonomy, stating:

up to 80 percent of the original inhabitants of Britain have ancestors going back thousands and thousands of years, and that the 'Anglo-Saxon' genetic contribution is less than five percent of the total DNA of Britain, a figure which is approximately similar for other groups such as the Danes.<sup>93</sup>

Here, history and culture are reduced to a simple measure of DNA by politicising the 2007 book *The Origins of the British*, by geneticist Stephen Oppenheimer.<sup>94</sup> This widely-rebutted and despised tactic of defining the 'indigenous' inhabitants of Britain in the modern day based upon racial and ethnic heritage may have spurred a negative response to identification based upon historical ethnic groups, and contributed to the projection of a vision of multiethnic Britain backwards upon the legendary Middle Ages. With that said, it is possible that some may look to the Middle Ages in search of racial and ethnic identity. While this thesis does not explore the effect of political affiliation on the public understanding of the medieval past, such a study would be worthwhile.

### **Who do you trust?**

In *The Presence of the Past*, participants rated films and TV programmes very low in two areas. They were not said to be believable versions of history, nor were they said to offer profound connections to the past. Participants were asked to rate these on a one to ten scale; for 'how connected to the past' a viewer felt, films and TV programmes ranked second to last at 6.0/10.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> "'Britons' Murdered in Pakistan Raises Issue of 'Who Is British'", *BNP News* <<http://www.bnp.org.uk/?q=news/%E2%80%9Cbritons%E2%80%9D-murdered-pakistan-raises-issue-%E2%80%9Cwho-british%E2%80%9D>> [accessed 31 May 2010].

<sup>94</sup> Stephen Oppenheimer, *The Origins of the British* (London: Robinson, 2007). Oppenheimer's work has been criticised as incomplete. See: Clive Gamble, 'Review: The Making of Britain', *Nature*, 445 (2007), 23-24; Erika Hagelberg, 'Review Articles: DNA', *Antiquity*, 79 (2005), 198-99. With that said, the argument against the BNP use of his research is simpler: ethnic indigenous-ness confers no special rights or privileges in modern Britain, nor should it.

<sup>95</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelen, p. 101.

On how trustworthy they were as a source of information, they ranked last at 5.0/10.<sup>96</sup>

Rosenzweig and Thelen found that respondents emphasised the importance of being able to actively interrogate a historical source. This is difficult to achieve with a film, which may explain why relatives, personal acquaintances and college professors consistently ranked higher than films in terms of trustworthiness. Though the received understanding that film viewing is a process by which audience members have the images on screen wash over them and which they blankly accept as factual is flawed, the presentation of information is a one-way process. The lack of ability for an audience to interact with, interrogate or challenge that which they see is an important factor in the visual media's low reliability score.

People do not like feeling deceived. In a study conducted in 2004 by Stanford University, seventh-graders (age 12-13) compared their ideas about Pocahontas (mostly constructed by the Disney film) with conflicting historical evidence. Sam Wineburg and Daisy Martin reported that '7th grade students responded indignantly to the movie version of the Pocahontas tale, expressing outrage at being fed a distorted, if not patently false, story', even going as far as 'writing letters of complaint to Roy Disney'.<sup>97</sup> This is similar to the findings in adults in *Presence of the Past*: 'In explaining why they distrusted movies and television, many respondents talked about their hatred and fear of being manipulated by people who distort the past to meet their own needs.'<sup>98</sup> Those 'own needs' are the *raison d'être* of the film industry: creating mass entertainment in order to turn a profit. Rosenzweig and Thelen explain: 'Television and movies provided the most blatant arenas for distorting the past because they appealed to low common denominators that could assemble the largest possible audience.'<sup>99</sup> Two of their respondents held pointed views of the accuracy of historical fiction film and TV: "historical accuracy is not the primary goal of movies

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<sup>96</sup> The full rankings were: Museums, 8.4. Personal accounts from grandparents or relatives: 8.0, Conversation with someone who was there: 7.8, College history professors: 7.3. High school history teachers: 6.6. Non-fiction books 6.4. Movies or television programmes about the past, 5.0. Rosenzweig and Thelen, p. 244.

<sup>97</sup> Sam Wineburg and Daisy Martin, 'Reading and Rewriting History', *Educational Leadership*, 62 (2004), 42-46 (p. 44).

<sup>98</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelen, p. 98.

<sup>99</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelen, p. 98.

and TV,”[...] “in order to enhance the dramatic power of film, I’m sure facts were altered and deleted, important facts were left out... Films and TV glorify incidents in the past and de-emphasize the negative effects of those events.” Also, ‘Television and movies “are embroidered to suit the producer and designed to make money. They are going to have enticing things in them which probably didn’t have anything to do with the truth at all”’.<sup>100</sup>

In spite of the generally low regard held for films and TV programs, 81% reported seeing a historical film or TV programme within the past 12 months, ranking third most-participated in activity out of ten.<sup>101</sup> This has interesting implications for the current study. Though these people reported that they do not believe the history presented to them on screen, it is possible that this is not true. Furthermore, though these people do not report feeling connected to the past when participating in this activity, the fact that they participate in it more than others presumably means that pleasure is gained from the activity. Rosenzweig and Thelen recount at least one respondent who finds the image and emotion provided by film believable, even if most of the participants panned them:

A 23-year-old dishwasher from Zanesville, Ohio liked movies about ‘the old days of King Arthur’ because he was ‘fascinated with the old types of armour’. In using movies to be transported to a different time or to encounter a famous person or event from the past, they were not mainly looking for the current state of historical knowledge about that subject, because they did not believe that was the strength of movies.<sup>102</sup>

Its strength, they go on to explain, is in conjuring a vivid, emotional sense of time and place.

*The Presence of the Past* found a distinction between people of different genders and education levels. ‘Women generally trusted all sources more than did men. People with more schooling were more likely to trust books and less likely to trust television programs than people with less schooling’.<sup>103</sup> In order to achieve a homogenous sample, this thesis examines individuals with approximately the same level of education. Though a comparative study based upon level of

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<sup>100</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelen, p. 98.

<sup>101</sup> Watching films and TV was only surmounted in the survey of how often people feel they participate in a historical activity by taking photographs and looking at photographs. Rosenzweig and Thelen, p. 234.

<sup>102</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelen, p. 101.

<sup>103</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelen, p. 91.

education is beyond the purview of this thesis, Rosenzweig and Thelen's conclusion supports the idea that there may be a significant difference along those lines. As a result, it warrants further study. In terms of gender, it will be important to examine whether there is a significant difference between genders regarding whether or not they trust that which they see. While, as a qualitative-based study, this thesis is not meant to be statistically generalisable, any findings which markedly support or contradict Rosenzweig and Thelen's conclusions may indicate avenues for further research.

### **Problems with *The Presence of the Past***

The researchers of the *Presence of the Past* take a largely optimistic view of their results. To them, their survey shows how actively and frequently Americans interact with the past, and how they use their past to contextualise their present and future. Michael Zuckerman takes a more pessimistic view of the results of the survey. To him, they imply an egocentric public concerned only with present needs: 'The only history that matters to the overwhelming majority of white Americans is *personal* history. Respondents reveal only the most minimal ties to others. They have no common ground, no common stories, no common knowledge [...] they care only for themselves or, at best, for their families [...] They cannot get out of self and they cannot get out of the present. [...] the other is, quite literally, "history"; and [...] history is both "boring" and "irrelevant"' .<sup>104</sup>

Furthermore, the methodology of the study relied largely upon quantitative methods. The survey asked participants to respond on a one to ten scale for most answers, or to select the answer from a list which they felt was most applicable. Data so derived are not well suited to the study of complex social phenomena, because participants are forced to respond to the limited set of questions provided by the surveyors (which reflect the surveyors' own assumptions) rather than in their own language. It is entirely possible that if asked to select what history was most

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<sup>104</sup> Michael Zuckerman, 'The Presence of the Present, the End of History', *The Public Historian*, 22 (2000), 19-22 (p. 19).

important to them from a list of 'national', 'ethnic', 'familial', or 'community', that responses might differ significantly if the question were asked in an open-ended manner such as 'What do you think is important about history?'

Additionally the researchers do not address the problem of participant performance, making it impossible to know to what extent the participants might have tailored their answers to fit what they either believed the researchers wanted to hear, or tailored their responses based upon what they felt the *right* answer was. As a result, though the participants ranked historical film and TV very low in terms of its trustworthiness, this should not be taken as an indicator that they do not, necessarily, trust film and TV and integrate what they view into their historical awareness. It is entirely possible that film and TV works in a more subtle fashion. As Scott Alan Metzger warns in his article 'Pedagogy and the Historical Feature Film',

When students watch history movies without the support of sufficient content knowledge and nuanced understandings of history, a possible (or probable) outcome is for the filmic account to "colonize" their thinking about the past—taking up residence in the mind as a kind of literal truth, as Van Sledright (2002) and Wineburg, Mosborg, and Porat (2000) found when talking with students about the historical events behind the Disney's 1995 animated musical *Pocahontas* and Robert Zemeckis's 1994 film *Forrest Gump*.<sup>105</sup>

In order to explore the more subtle 'colonizing' effect that filmic historical narrative may possess, the methodology for this thesis is drawn primarily from qualitative, rather than quantitative methods. Though this methodological approach uses far smaller numbers of subjects than quantitative methods, which makes it more difficult to generalise to the broader public, the greater time spent with each participant allows for more nuanced findings and the researcher can interrogate the findings in a more sophisticated way. The central methodological issue of the difference between quantitative and qualitative research, and the attempts I have taken to overcome the pitfalls noted above, will be addressed in the next chapter.

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<sup>105</sup> Scott Alan Metzger, 'Pedagogy and the Historical Feature Film: Toward Historical Literacy', *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies*, 37 (2007), 67-75 (p. 68).



## Sociology and the search for a method

Any sociologically-based study of the public understanding of history places itself, wittingly or not, within the sociological fields of constructivism and the sociology of knowledge. This section sets out to explain these theories and their relevance, and contribution to, the theoretical framework that is used in the chapters that follow.

This thesis employs the theories of the ‘sociology of knowledge’, as coined by Max Scheler in the 1920s and more fully developed and refined by Berger and Luckmann in the seminal *The Social Construction of Reality*.<sup>106</sup> Berger and Luckmann’s overarching thesis is that all knowledge is constructed socially, and that all social phenomena are a product of social interactions with others and with commonly-accepted institutions. This means that an individual’s basic knowledge, even their perception of reality, differs based upon their social position: ‘what is “real” to a Tibetan monk may not be “real” to an American businessman’.<sup>107</sup> The ‘sociology of knowledge’ is particularly relevant for this study as it explores common understandings and interactions with the ‘everyday world’ rather than intellectual ‘ideas’ or philosophy:

The sociology of knowledge must first of all concern itself with what people ‘know’ as ‘reality’ in their everyday, non- or pre-theoretical lives. In other words, common-sense ‘knowledge’ rather than ‘ideas’ must be the central focus for the sociology of knowledge.<sup>108</sup>

Their distinction between ‘knowledge’ and ‘ideas’ represents a fundamental break from philosophical approaches to knowledge. Whereas philosophy is concerned with the validity of its arguments, and the development of ‘ideas’, the sociological project is far less concerned with whether the knowledge it explores is valid, and is more concerned with:

whatever passes for ‘knowledge’ in a society, regardless of the ultimate validity or invalidity (by whatever criteria) of such ‘knowledge’. And in so far as all human

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<sup>106</sup> Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991).

<sup>107</sup> Berger and Luckmann, p. 15.

<sup>108</sup> Berger and Luckmann, p. 27.

'knowledge' is developed, transmitted and maintained in social situations, the sociology of knowledge must seek to understand the process by which this is done in such a way that a taken-for-granted 'reality' congeals for the man in the street.<sup>109</sup>

This premise that knowledge (including knowledge of history) is a social construct with little correlation to objective reality has important implications for the current study. The validity of this knowledge or its relation to objective reality or scholastic understandings is immaterial. While it may be occasionally worthy of note if the knowledge the subjects express corresponds with what scholars believe, this is only incidental. Far more central is what that common knowledge is and how it is constructed.

This knowledge is acquired through a variety of social institutions, for example school, interaction with elders, or popular culture. Even though its relation to everyday reality is tenuous, it can have great effect on everyday life. As Berger and Luckmann express

I relate to my predecessors through highly anonymous typifications – 'my immigrant great-grandparents', and even more, 'the Founding Fathers'. [...] the typifications of predecessors have at least some such [individualised] content, albeit of a highly mythical sort. The anonymity of both these sets of typifications, however, does not prevent their entering as elements into the reality of everyday life, sometimes in a very decisive way. After all, I may sacrifice my life in loyalty to the Founding Fathers – or, for that matter, on behalf of future generations.<sup>110</sup>

The field of the exploration of the construction (and constructed-ness) of knowledge has become known as constructivism. David Morrison uses these constructivist theories of knowledge to develop audience research methodologies; much of the theoretical basis for the methodology of this thesis is based on his *The Search for a Method: Focus Groups and the Development of Mass Communication Research*, and demonstrated in his work *Defining Violence: The Search for Understanding*.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Berger and Luckmann, p. 15.

<sup>110</sup> Berger and Luckmann, p. 48.

<sup>111</sup> David E. Morrison, *The Search for a Method: Focus Groups and the Development of Mass Communication Research* (Luton: University of Luton Press, 1998); David E. Morrison, *Defining Violence: The Search for Understanding* (Luton: University of Luton Press, 1999).

In his study of violence in the British media, Morrison and his team set out to answer the question ‘How do viewers define violence?’<sup>112</sup> Fundamentally, the study attempted to ‘understand the factors at play when someone categorizes an act as violent’, in order to ‘discover whether there is a single definition of violence’.<sup>113</sup> They asked the participants of their focus groups to judge what in the media was ‘serious violence and what was, although violent, not serious violence’.<sup>114</sup> This allowed participants to judge violence subjectively rather than defining violence by a set of predetermined criteria. Allowing the participants to construct their own idea of what ‘violence’ is subjectively, and along a sort of ‘sliding scale’, rather than through predetermined criteria or a ‘yes or no’ binary, is an important distinction for the current study. ‘Violence’ and ‘medieval-ness’<sup>115</sup> are different. However, both are subjectively-defined concepts that may have multiple definitions. Each is a category that can be applied due to a variety of features and factors, and each varies according to individual interpretation and experience. Though historians bracket the Middle Ages by certain historical upheavals (which will be explored more fully in chapter 7), since these focus groups are not comprised of historians it would be inappropriate to impose this definition on the participants. In fact, these participants may not define the period by dates and events at all, but by another rubric entirely. Furthermore, though a rigid-thinker might be inclined to define something as either medieval or not medieval on a binary (since it would either be something from the Middle Ages or not), it is important to explore whether people understand ‘medievalness’ to be a relative quality, where something can be ‘more’ or ‘less’ medieval. Defining what essence makes something subjectively ‘more’ or ‘less’ medieval is of far greater import than simply generating a list of those things which are or are not medieval. As a result, Morrison’s theoretical methodology for exploring violence is applicable to this study. For this reason, one of the primary questions that this research asks is: what makes something medieval? What makes a

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<sup>112</sup> Morrison, *Defining Violence*, p. 1.

<sup>113</sup> Morrison, *Defining Violence*, p. 1.

<sup>114</sup> Morrison, *Defining Violence*, p. vii.

<sup>115</sup> ‘Medievalness’ is the term I use to describe the subjective degree to which something is understood to be a part of the Middle Ages. This term is used frequently by participants in my study and their use of the term and similar ones is discussed in chapter 6.

film seem more or less medieval? By exploring the films in question in this way this research attempts to draw a basic picture of what qualities, characters, images or icons are used to define the period, and what the essence of 'medievalness' may be.

### **Audience reception theories: Encoding/decoding**

In 1967, Roland Barthes wrote 'The Death of the Author', sharply criticising the literary world's focus on seeking out a single monolithic interpretation of a text born from the mind of its author. He argued, 'Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.' Rather, a text has no single meaning but a myriad of possible readings: 'a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author.'<sup>116</sup> Barthes repositioned the genesis point of meaning in a text to the reader and placed the context of the reader at the forefront of the construction of meaning.

Ten years later, Stuart Hall applied Barthes' theoretical repositioning of meaning to the study of the televisual media. While not taking as radical a position as Barthes and doing away with authorship entirely, Hall argued that the meaning of the text is mediated by its producers and audience.<sup>117</sup> Producers 'encode' certain meanings into the text, both content and ideology. There is no guarantee that the audience will 'decode' the same meaning.<sup>118</sup> Hall therefore posits a more active role for the audience member than had been previously proposed; to him, instead of a

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<sup>116</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 147.

<sup>117</sup> In this context, 'producers' encompasses all the people who work at creating a film, rather than those holding the job title of 'Producer'. The singular of the word, 'producer' is more often used in academic writing, which promotes the false idea that there is one singular person responsible for the film—a popular idea amongst auteur theorists. However, no matter how autocratic the director or how powerful the star, the ultimate product of a film is a collaboration between hundreds of creative minds each of which contributes to the ultimate product. Because of this, I will always use the plural when referring to those responsible for the creation of a film.

<sup>118</sup> Stuart Hall, pp. 128-138 (pp. 128-29).

passive audience accepting what they see, he posits an audience that plays an active role in the interpretation of the media. The difference between the encoded and decoded meanings constitutes, for Hall, a 'margin of understanding', from which different readings of these meanings are generated.

In Hall's theory, a viewer decodes what they see from one of three positions. First is the '*dominant-hegemonic position*', where the viewer accepts the messages and meta-messages in what they see. Second is the '*oppositional code*', where they decode the messages in a 'globally contrary way', rejecting outright both its message and its ideological positioning.<sup>119</sup> Finally, the '*negotiated position*', where the '*negotiated version* contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements [...] it operates with exceptions to the rule'.<sup>120</sup> As Ellen Seiter explains, 'the viewer inflects his interpretation on the basis of a particular social experience. The viewer may enjoy a "pick and choose" relationship to the genre, ignoring more disagreeable sections and concentrating on those more to taste'.<sup>121</sup> Interpretations from each of these basic positions can create an entirely different reading.

When employing the 'encoding-decoding' model in studying a film, it is of equal importance to study not only the film but also the filmmakers as encoders and the audience as decoders (while still remaining sensitive to the myriad possible readings, whether dominant, marginal or oppositional, of any given film). There have been a few audience reception studies which employ the encoding/decoding model, though most explicitly address political issues and the news media. Charlotte Brunson and David Morley have explored the various ways audiences decoded news magazine programme *Nationwide* in *Everyday Television*, which Morley (working alone) expanded in a further study titled *The 'Nationwide' Audience*.<sup>122</sup> Morley showed the same episode of *Nationwide* to focus groups of adult education students divided by class and gender.

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<sup>119</sup> Stuart Hall, pp. 128-138 (pp. 137-38).

<sup>120</sup> Stuart Hall, pp. 128-138 (p. 137).

<sup>121</sup> Ellen Seiter, *Television and New Media Audiences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 14.

<sup>122</sup> Charlotte Brunson and David Morley, *Everyday Television: Nationwide*, Television Monographs (British Film Institute), 10 (London: British Film Institute, 1978); David Morley, *The 'Nationwide' Audience: Structure and Decoding*, BFI Television Monograph, 11 (London: British Film Institute, 1980).

His conclusions were that, though some decodings were predictable based upon demographic features of the participants, many were not. In many cases, audience responses were unpredictable. Therefore the encoding/decoding model may be descriptive of the process of interpretation, but it is not prescriptive, or a way of predicting what interpretive position an individual will take. John Corner, Kay Richardson and Natalie Fenton further developed Morley's perspective in *Nuclear Reactions*, which focuses both on the form that media takes and 'the "creative" process of interpretation'.<sup>123</sup> They interpreted their findings in terms of the decoding 'frames' that their participants used: civic, political, personal or evidential. A major study conducted using the encoding/decoding model is Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis' study of *The Cosby Show*, published in *Enlightened Racism*.<sup>124</sup> As the title might imply, the purpose of the study was polemical; the interviewers used *The Cosby Show* to explore racial issues in America with the participants. While this study is important in that it is one of the few major studies of fiction from the encoding/decoding model, it suffers because of its polemical viewpoint; the effect of the focus group setting, and the emphasis placed on issues of race by the moderators led to participants performing roles 'in the spirit of seeming enlightened, liberal'.<sup>125</sup> This indicates the importance of interview methods which allow participants to converse as freely as possible within the constraints of the topic.

Janet Staiger has used a similar concept of the multiplicity of readings in studying the reception of film. Building upon Barthes and Hall, she advocates a 'Historical Materialist' approach, which 'assumes an interaction amongst context, text and individual in which a perceiver's socially and historically developed mental concepts and language may only be partially available to self-reflection and are most certainly heterogeneous'.<sup>126</sup> This heterogeneity of experience, and the multiplicity of readings it implies, coincides with Hall's margin of understanding. Staiger wrote in

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<sup>123</sup> John Corner, Kay Richardson and Natalie Fenton, *Nuclear Reactions: Form and Response in 'Public Issue' Television*, Acamedia Research Monograph, 4 (London: John Libbey, 1990), p. 47.

<sup>124</sup> Sut Jhally, *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1992).

<sup>125</sup> Seiter, p. 18.

<sup>126</sup> Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 72.

‘The Handmaiden of Villainy: Methods and Problems in Studying the Historical Reception of a Film’, that the purpose of her method was not to establish a ‘correct’ reading of a film, but to expose ‘the range of possible readings and reading processes at historical moments and their relation to groups of historical spectators’.<sup>127</sup> Staiger’s focus upon the confluence of context, film and individual also seems astute, as does the sensitivity to a multiplicity of interpretation. However, her treatment of the individual seems problematic. She argues against using empirical and social science methodology, saying that these studies ‘only tell investigators what spectators thought they saw or felt or believed’.<sup>128</sup> It is understandable if Staiger here is criticising the use of this methodology to understand reception of twenty, thirty or fifty-year old films – since audiences cannot be expected to accurately recall how they understood a film which they saw so long ago. However, to argue that social sciences methodology is not appropriate for the study of how people react to a film they have seen recently seems unnecessarily distrustful. This privileges the position of the theorist/researcher, and assumes the ignorance of the subject even when it comes to their own feelings, ideas or interpretations. This is a dangerous assumption upon which to predicate research. If we can trust the validity of a scholarly reading of a film, surely some validity can be found in a scholarly reading of audience responses to that film.

The study which follows employs an adaptation of Hall’s basic encoding/decoding model. In it, I attempt to understand how the audiences of a film decode that film, but instead of focusing upon their political or ideological positioning (as has been done previously with *Nationwide* or *The Cosby Show*), I shall focus upon how they interpret the film within the context of their previous understandings about the historical period represented in the film. The interpretive positions are much the same as Hall’s: a ‘dominant/hegemonic’ position would occur when the aspect of the film corresponds neatly with the expectations of the viewer and therefore reinforces their previously-held understandings. An ‘oppositional’ decoding would likely occur when the film

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<sup>127</sup> Janet Staiger, ‘The Handmaiden of Villainy: Methods and Problems in Studying the Historical Reception of a Film’, *Wide Angle*, 8 (1986), 19-27 (p. 20).

<sup>128</sup> Staiger, *The Handmaiden of Villainy*, 19-27 (p. 20).

directly contradicts the expectations of the viewer, and where the viewer, as a result, rejects what they have seen. A 'negotiated' decoding will occur when participants revise either their previous understandings in line with what they are shown, or in some cases misremembers what they have been shown in order to have it correspond with their understandings. In the latter, the most important factor may be how much trust the individual puts in the film or their understandings, and how compelling the evidence from each may be. Ultimately the impact of the medieval film upon its audience depends upon the crucial moment where the viewer decides, either consciously or unconsciously, whether what they have just seen is more, or less, believable than what they thought they knew before.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has surveyed scholarship on the medieval film to demonstrate the need for the kind of study that this thesis undertakes. Almost all of the research done recently has been highly theoretical in nature and relied upon film studies and critical theory to answer the fundamental questions 'what is medieval film?' and 'why study medieval film?'. This thesis makes a break from those approaches. It answers the questions by arguing the importance of the opinions of the public in defining 'medieval' and, consequently, the need to employ sociological methods and theories. 'Medieval film' is best defined by the eyes of its beholders. This demands an exploration of what qualities make a film seem medieval, not just in a binary 'medieval' or 'not medieval' way, but in a relativistic, subjective, constructivist fashion. This requires a rigorous understanding of how the public understands their medieval past – a project which has not yet been done. In what follows, two questions are explored. The first is: 'what is the public understanding of the Middle Ages today?'. Only when that question is broached can the second be considered: 'How do films that depict the Middle Ages affect that public understanding?'



### Chapter 3: Research methodology

As the previous chapters have stated, the purpose of this study is to explore how the public understanding of the Middle Ages is shaped by, and itself shapes, the interpretation of big-budget films. To this end, data were collected from nineteen British students through focus group interviews. The questions that guided this study follow below. This chapter will explain how the study was conducted, including the participant selection process and the procedure for collecting and analysing the data. After this comes a discussion of the rationale behind the design, and its limitations.

#### Research questions:

1. How do British undergraduates (with no GCSE or higher academic qualifications in history) describe their understanding of the Middle Ages?<sup>129</sup>
2. What influences or experiences in their lives, past or present, do these students describe as influencing their understanding of the Middle Ages?
3. What role have big budget medieval films played (or currently play) in these students' understanding of the Middle Ages?

#### Research design

The research employed qualitative data gathering and analysis methods. Qualitative data gathering entails conducting and performing in-depth analysis of interviews in order to build a nuanced view of complex social phenomena.<sup>130</sup> The data gathering for this project entailed four

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<sup>129</sup> General Certificate of Secondary Education, (commonly known as GCSE) is an academic qualification taken by British students between the ages of fourteen and sixteen. GCSE also refers to the secondary school courses which prepare students for those exams (comprising their education between fourteen and sixteen). The only GCSEs required for students are those in English, Mathematics and Science (with Welsh and Irish also compulsory in some schools in Wales and Northern Ireland). It is roughly analogous with grades nine through eleven in the USA.

<sup>130</sup> This differs from quantitative data gathering methods, such as surveys and polls, which survey large numbers of individuals but only use a comparatively small amount of data from each individual. As a result, results produced quantitative methods are more generalisable, but usually less nuanced. As Bruce Berg writes, 'Qualitative research, thus, refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols and descriptions of things. In contrast, quantitative research refers to counts and measures of

sets of focus group interviews with nineteen participants. Participants were volunteers from the undergraduate student body at the University of Leeds. Recruitment was via mass emails and flyers posted on campus. After this, volunteers were sent a screening demographic questionnaire (Appendix 2). The questionnaire excluded anyone who had studied the Middle Ages at GCSE level or above, who did not self-identify as British, who had not studied exclusively in the UK, and who have not seen at least three recent films which portray the Middle Ages. The sampling strategy will be explained below, (pg. 58) and the participants will be more fully described in chapter 5.

The pilot focus group, conducted in November 2008, included five women. This group met once for a ninety-minute discussion that focused exclusively upon research question 1. The group began with a word-association exercise. Each participant was given a page with 'medieval' or 'Middle Ages' at the top. They were then asked to write their associations with the word. Half the participants were first given 'medieval' and half were first given 'Middle Ages'. After they had completed the exercise, they then switched words. The point of this exercise was threefold. Firstly, it served as an icebreaker, to prompt participants' thinking about the topic and to give them reference points upon which they could base later discussion. Secondly, it provoked a consideration of the semantic differences between 'medieval' and 'Middle Ages'. Finally, it produced individual responses before any group interaction and discussion. These responses were therefore free from the inclination towards consensus which commonly occurs during group discussions.

Next, participants were split into two groups. They were provided with another sheet containing an oval with the words 'medieval' or 'Middle Ages' in the centre, and asked to create 'concept maps' based upon their responses to the word association.<sup>131</sup> Each group then shared its scheme and ranking system. This exercise was meant to allow participants to express how they believe they organise their schema. This exercise also allowed them to define ideas based upon

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things'. Bruce L. Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, 6th edn (Boston: Pearson, 2007), pp. 2-6, 3.

<sup>131</sup> A. J. Cañas and J. D. Novak, *The Theory Underlying Concept Maps and How to Construct and Use Them* (Florida Institute for Human and Machine Cognition, 2008).

their own understanding rather than imposing a preconceived organisational scheme upon their responses. A discussion of these words and their relationship followed, as well as a general discussion about the participants' understanding of the period and the sources of their knowledge. The results of this pilot study were then used to refine the methodology of the subsequent groups.

The other three groups were conducted during the spring of 2009, each with between four and six participants. Each group met three times. For the first two meetings, the session began with a thirty-minute discussion, then a film screening followed by a thirty-minute discussion. Due to timing constraints, the final meeting of each group began with the film screening and concluded with an hour-long discussion after the final film.<sup>132</sup> Refreshments were provided during the screenings, and participants were rewarded with two free movie passes if they completed all sessions of their group.

For all of the groups in spring 2009, on the first day participants were first interviewed about their understanding of the medieval past (similarly, though in abbreviated form, to the November 2008 group). During this discussion, they completed the above-described word-association exercises and discussed them. They were then shown the film *Beowulf*.<sup>133</sup> They were next invited to participate in a discussion, which was audio recorded. While participants were allowed to raise any issues related to the film, in all groups the researcher asked questions related

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<sup>132</sup> Though it would have been easier to recruit different individuals for each film screening (because it was difficult to find individuals willing to spend so much time in these discussions), doing so could raise validity concerns. It would be difficult to justify comparing the reactions of different people to different films; limiting the variables is more sensible in generating results which can be compared. It would be possible to run many groups reacting to one film, but this limits the potential to compare data from many sources. Though this study is intended to be exploratory rather than comprehensive, limiting the scope of the study to only one film would have been excessively limiting.

<sup>133</sup> While it might have been more expedient only to show the participants clips from the films, to have done so would raise important questions about validity. The selection of the clips could unduly influence the results of the groups. Presenting only clips, though faster, would be an artificial environment which would over-structure the interview and potentially skew the responses. As a constructivist position is being taken with regards to understanding of the Middle Ages, it would be inappropriate to choose which pieces of each film exemplify certain aspects of the period or the issue at hand and possibly produce undue moderator influence. Ideally, the viewing of the film should be as close to a 'natural' experience of watching the film as is possible considering the restraints of the research environment.

to the film's authenticity to the source material, its 'realism' and how its depiction of the period compared to participants' expectations.

On the second day, participants were first asked to produce another word association exercise, this time for the word 'crusade', and discuss what the word meant to them. They then were shown the film *Kingdom of Heaven*. Afterwards, the discussion focused on the medieval aspects of the film and whether they felt it portrayed 'crusade' in a way they expected. The discussion also often included the depiction of knighthood and kingship and how this film compared with *Beowulf*, which they had seen the night before.

On the final day, participants were shown *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*.<sup>134</sup> Due to the length of this film (three and a half hours), there was no preliminary discussion. After the film, there was an hour-long discussion focussing on whether the film was realistic, to what degree participants believed the film to be 'medieval', whether the fantastical elements seemed believable, and possible relationships between the fantasy genre and the Middle Ages. This final discussion also included a comparison of all three films, their landscapes, depictions of kingship and knighthood, the role of heroes, and the role of women in the films.

Each group was asked a similar set of semi-structured interview questions in order to gauge whether, and how they had learned from each film. The questions included:

- What about the film seemed particularly medieval to you?
- What about the film seemed less medieval to you?
- What would you change in order to make this film more medieval?
- Do you feel like you learned anything from this movie?

These open-ended questions were designed to allow participants to express themselves freely.

Follow-up questions were drawn from the participants' responses. In addition, two thematic

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<sup>134</sup> There are a variety of releases of each of these films. For the purpose of the focus groups, I showed the participants the theatrical release edition of each film, rather than any of the extended editions. Also, *Beowulf* was frequently seen in theatres in 3D. However due to technological limitations of home viewing, I could only show the participants *Beowulf* in 2D. This may have affected their understanding of the films, but it is difficult to comment on how without evidence.

topics were raised by the moderator regarding elements that all films had in common: kingship and knighthood. However, as a result of the open-ended nature of the questions, topics ranged widely, and in consequence the results reflect this broad scope of interpretations. Additionally, some of the spontaneously-arising topics were only discussed by one or two groups. This does not necessarily mean that other participants would not have felt similarly had these topics been discussed—or that they would have disagreed. Thus, unless numbers are clearly conclusive (in that something was mentioned by all groups or none), exact numbers of participants who held a certain viewpoint will not be given here, since that would imply a statistical certainty and an ability to extrapolate generalisations that this study does not possess by design.

### **Qualitative data analysis**

The data, including the word association data and focus group interviews, were analysed using qualitative methods as described by Joseph Maxwell in *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* and Bruce Berg in *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*.<sup>135</sup> An inductive approach was used, the aims of which, as David Thomas writes, are ‘to aid an understanding of meaning in complex data through the development of summary themes or categories from the raw data’, and to thus derive conclusions and theory from those emergent themes and categories.<sup>136</sup> In aid of this, each group interview was audio recorded and transcribed, and read at least twice to identify common themes. After reading, each response was organised into substantive categories that encapsulated the meaning(s) of the statement. The word-association exercises were also examined for common responses. All responses were then sorted by category in order to explore and identify any emerging sub-themes, contradictions or subtleties. Those themes and subthemes that emerged from the data were used to make sense of the data.

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<sup>135</sup> Joseph Alex Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*, 2nd edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005); Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*.

<sup>136</sup> David R. Thomas, *A general inductive approach for qualitative data analysis*, School of Population Health, University of Auckland, Research Methods Resources <<http://www.fmhs.auckland.ac.nz/soph/centres/hrmas/resources/default.aspx>>, [accessed 15 May, 2009].

Substantive categories were created after the initial and follow-up readings of the transcripts. Initially stand-alone themes were identified. The transcripts were then re-read and hierarchical relationships drawn among the data and thematic categories.

Because of the lack of previous research on this topic, this study is designed to generate primarily what Klaus Krippendorff calls 'emic' data, with less of an emphasis on what he calls 'etic' data.<sup>137</sup> Krippendorff, along with Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) define emic data as data that 'arise in a natural or indigenous form. They are only minimally imposed by the researcher or research setting'.<sup>138</sup> Etic data, on the other hand, are those data which are generated as a specific response to structured questions. While each has value, emic data are most appropriate for research areas where there has been little previous research. The emic data produced can be used to formulate new theories and expose avenues for more structured research.

While it is impossible, and arguably even undesirable, to completely eliminate the influence of the research setting or the researcher from the results of the study, this study relied upon semi-structured, open-ended questions and probes primarily formulated from the participants' previous responses. The interview questions (Appendix 1) were 'semi-structured' in that, though they are structured by the research design to keep the participants on a particular topic of interest, they are not designed (barring question two) to elicit short-answer responses, and are open-ended enough to allow the respondents to respond freely, structuring their responses however they see fit.

Emic and etic codes were both used in the sorting of the data. Emic codes, also called 'in vivo' codes, are codes which employ the actual verbiage of the subjects themselves, whereas etic codes are based upon extrapolations and examinations of the researcher.<sup>139</sup> Examples of emic codes included words or phrases used by the participants such as 'medievally cone hats' and 'lack of hygiene' while etic codes included researcher-labelled codes such as 'medieval costume' and

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<sup>137</sup> Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980).

<sup>138</sup> David Stewart and Prem Shamdanani, *Focus Groups: Theory and practice*, (Newbury Park: SAGE, 1990), 13.

<sup>139</sup> For a fuller explanation of emic and etic codes, see Thomas A. Schwandt, *Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry*, 2nd edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001), pp. 65-66.

'influence of Disney films'. Some overarching themes that emerged from the data were geography, education, childhood memory, and coincidence or conflict with previous knowledge.

### **Research design rationale**

Qualitative methods, such as individual interviews or focus groups, bear significant advantages over quantitative methods (e.g. surveys or polls) in gathering information on individual experiences, opinions, or complex social phenomena. Qualitative data gathering methods can explore a sociological phenomenon or process in more depth than a poll or survey.<sup>140</sup> Speaking with a participant at length allows the researcher to explore the meaning of what a participant has said, to ask follow-up questions and fully to explore the meaning that may be loaded in hesitancy, confusion or other subtle linguistic cues which may shed further light on a complex issue.<sup>141</sup>

Additionally, qualitative methods are useful for exploring new areas of research such as that described in this thesis; at the current stage of research, qualitative methods are required in order to develop the theory which may underpin any further research.

Though quantitative data gathering methods, such as surveys, can offer statistical verifiability and reproducibility, they cannot provide the depth of understanding required by this field of enquiry.

### **Focus groups**

Focus groups are a type of moderator-led group interview, in which participants are asked to react to and discuss various stimuli. Developed during World War II to evaluate mass response to radio

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<sup>140</sup> For more information on the virtues of Qualitative and Quantitative research, see: *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 3rd edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), pp. 1-42; Richard A. Krueger and Mary Anne Casey, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*, 3rd edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000), p. 11.

<sup>141</sup> Andrea Fontana and James H. Frey, 'Interviewing: The Art of Science', in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (London: Sage Publications, 1994), pp. 361-376 (pp. 370-372).

programmes, their employment has since become a useful tool for social-science inquiry.<sup>142</sup>

Though there is no set formula for focus groups, they typically have between 4 and 12 participants, depending upon the demands of the research.<sup>143</sup>

### **Other advantages to using focus groups**

For the purpose of this study, focus group research methods offer a few notable advantages over other research methodologies. Firstly, focus groups can acquire data from a larger group of participants in a much more time and cost-effective manner than individual interviews. The open-ended format of a focus group also allows the researcher to gather, as Stewart and Shamdasani assert, 'large and rich amounts of data *in the respondents' own words*' [my emphasis].<sup>144</sup>

Additionally, the open-ended nature of focus groups allow participants more free rein to, as Barbour and Kitzinger assert, 'generate their own questions, frames and concepts and to pursue their own priorities on their own terms, in their own vocabulary'.<sup>145</sup> Because this study is focused upon a social activity, movie watching, it is well-served by a methodology that is conducted in a social atmosphere which can best replicate the experience of watching and discussing a film.

Watching a film is, at the basic level of interaction between viewer and film, an individual activity. With that said, it is typically done (at least in the context of the cinema) in groups as a social activity. The vibrant discussion after, or even during the film, is an important way for people to formulate and voice their opinions and structure their interpretation of what they saw. Though the interaction between the film and the individual is unique to each person, the interpretive talk

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<sup>142</sup> David W. Stewart and Prem N. Shamdasani, *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice* (London: Sage Publications, 1990), p. 9.

<sup>143</sup> Stewart and Shamdasani, p. 10.

<sup>144</sup> It is important to note that the responses in focus groups, unlike responses garnered from quantitative research methods or closed-ended qualitative methods are given in the respondents own words. This allows the researcher a far richer pool of data, where responses can be close-read to construct a more nuanced interpretation than would be possible by responses to a scripted survey or interview.

<sup>145</sup> *Developing Focus Group Research: Politics, Theory and Practice*, ed. by Rosaline S. Barbour and Jenny Kitzinger (London: Sage Publications, 1999), p. 5.



which inevitably occurs after the film helps viewers to negotiate the meaning and value of what they have just seen with others. It is this phenomenon into which this research hopes to tap.<sup>146</sup>

Another advantage to using focus groups is the synergistic responses which groups provoke. One participant often prompts a response from their peers, allowing them to 'react and build upon the responses of other group members'.<sup>147</sup> Disagreements and differences of opinion can then be brought to the fore and explored within the group, rather than simply left to the analysis of the researcher. Also, the interactive nature of focus groups allows synergy between subjects; when done well, subjects will prompt each other to offer up more thorough input than would be achieved using an individual interview. Finally, this technique will allow a larger number of people to be interviewed within the timeframe allotted, and to more fluidly compare and contrast their viewpoints.

#### **Disadvantages to using focus groups**

In conducting focus groups, certain group behaviours must be discouraged during the session and taken into account in analysis. Firstly, any group interaction provokes the natural sociable desire to form a consensus. Individuals may agree, especially if merely in brief verbal assents, with opinions that they may or may not themselves hold. At times it can be difficult for a researcher to distinguish truly assenting opinions from those which are generated by the group's desire to be agreeable, or the simple 'yeah' or 'uh-huh's which acknowledge polite comprehension rather than true agreement. For this reason the moderator should thoroughly explore agreement, and encourage dissent wherever appropriate during the discussion.

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<sup>146</sup> This post-film discussion and negotiation does not occur only immediately after the film, but also now via the internet, through a myriad of discussion groups, chat rooms and fan web pages. Though this variety of post-film discussion and negotiation is interesting, the anonymity offered by the internet tends to warp discussion in ways that are particular to the internet; opinions are voiced more violently and contention can erupt more easily than they would in person. Additionally, transcripts of internet chat rooms and message boards cannot be asked follow-up questions or for clarifications in the same way that a participant in a focus group could. While reactions to films found on the internet are certainly an interesting avenue for exploration, a moderated focus group interview can offer far richer responses from participants who can be questioned face-to-face.

<sup>147</sup> Stewart and Shamdasani, p. 16.

Additionally, for every researcher there exists the problem of group dynamic. As any teacher can attest, often in group interaction sessions one or two members of any group may dominate the conversation. If this is taken as representative of the larger group opinion, it might over-represent the ideas of those more talkative members. It is important for the moderator, then, to encourage all members to contribute as equitably as possible.

There is always the question of whether or not the respondents are accurately reporting their own thoughts and to what degree the researcher should believe what is said. The researcher must skirt the fine line between accepting all which they are told at face value and treating the respondent as if they were a hostile witness to their experience. It is important for the analysis to explore those internal contradictions which are found in the transcript of the group in order to explore respondents' unconscious ideas. However, it must be taken on faith that if a participant expresses an opinion, that unless there is compelling evidence to believe the contrary, that they are the best reporters of their own experience.

### **Selecting which 'public': The sampling rationale**

There is not one 'public'. When 'public history' or 'the public understanding of the past' is discussed academically, there is an implicit assumption that 'public' is defined as those who are not historians. This study defines the public similarly. As a result the sample excluded anyone with academic credentials which would give them specialist knowledge. This included any academic study of the period at GCSE level or higher.<sup>148</sup> In addition to calcifying understanding of the topic, the authority conferred by academic study or qualification might have caused their presence to influence the group.

The sample was drawn from a range of areas including maths, physics, biology, fashion design, English, law, psychology, and pharmacology. The specific participants will be discussed further in chapter 5.

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<sup>148</sup> Some of the participants reported taking English or history at GCSE and A-level, but none had studied medieval literature or history in those courses.

This study is also focused on the public who are interested in this type of film. It would be possible to conduct focus groups comprised of persons who never go to the movies or watch TV, but doing so would not provide any insights into how the larger public who are more familiar with visual culture are influenced by the films in question. It would also be less fruitful to study individuals who never see medieval film.<sup>149</sup> Therefore, the screening questionnaire includes a list of twenty-two popular medieval or fantasy films. Anyone who had seen less than three of these was excluded.<sup>150</sup>

The sample for this study was also limited to persons who self-identify as British and who went to school exclusively in the UK. Almost all participants spontaneously further specified that their nationality was English and had studied exclusively in England (meaning most had similar curricula at school). Though the University of Leeds hosts a wide variety of international students, the cultural experience of these students would likely be different from that of one native to the UK. While it may be valuable to do a cross-cultural comparative study, this is beyond the scope of the current study.

Using undergraduate students from the University of Leeds makes certain demographic characteristics implicit in the sample. Students from the University of Leeds are all academically successful enough to gain entry (though departmental requirements vary). All completed GCSEs and A Levels to a high standard. Members of the student body are, on average, from middle-class backgrounds, and students from the North of England predominate. With that said, region of origin and economic class were not considered in the sampling strategy. Thus, further assumptions about this would be inappropriate.

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<sup>149</sup> A comparative study of the 'Middle Ages' schemata of those people who are very familiar with visual culture and those who avoid visual culture could be very fruitful, but is beyond the purview of this study.

<sup>150</sup> Those twenty-two films were either popular big-budget English-language medieval or fantasy films made during the lifetimes of the participants (and thus likely to have been seen by them), or enduringly popular earlier films, such as the Disney adaptations of *Sword in the Stone* and *Robin Hood*, or *Monty Python and the Quest for the Holy Grail*.

Volunteers were not precluded from participating if they had already seen the films that were to be screened during the groups. However, their memories of previous experiences with the film were acknowledged and addressed during the interview.

### **Rationale behind the choice of films**

Since this study is interested in the public understanding of the Middle Ages and the influence of films released between 2000 and 2009, the films selected for study were those which have had the greatest public impact. While it is impossible to say definitively what film has had the most impact on the public understanding, the simplest rubric seems to be the films which were seen by the most people. Since records of DVD sales or screenings on television are not publicly available, the only remaining way to judge a film's popularity is box-office receipts. Judging by this, the most popular medieval films in the UK from the past ten years are: *Beowulf* (2007), with \$14,212,342 at the UK box office, *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) with \$14,535,907, and *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* (2001-2003) totalling \$288,787,236.<sup>151</sup> Since *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* was written, shot, produced and edited as a single narrative rather than in three distinct parts, the three films are treated as one (this is for the further reason that were I to choose the three top-grossing medieval films of the past ten years, this thesis would be solely on *The Lord of the Rings*). However, since it was not practical to show the entire trilogy to the focus groups, *The Return of the King* was chosen as it was the most popular of the three films.<sup>152</sup>

Choosing these three particular films also allows this thesis to explore three very different types of medieval film. Each film mixes fiction and non-fiction, medieval fact with medieval fantasy, but each does so in a different way. *Kingdom of Heaven* is an historical epic, or arguably an historical biopic. *The Lord of the Rings* is a medieval-flavoured fantasy biopic. Most

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<sup>151</sup> Box Office Mojo <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/>> [accessed 14 January 2008]. Box office figures, even for international markets, are only readily available in United States dollars.

<sup>152</sup> Box Office Mojo <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/>> [accessed 14 January 2008]. The *Fellowship of the Ring*: \$90,228,837 UK; *The Two Towers*: \$91,914,687 UK; *The Return of the King*: \$106,643,712 UK. The Fellowship of the Ring, The Two Towers and The Return of the King are fifteenth, eighth and second on the list of the highest grossing films of all time respectively, with a total intake of over three billion dollars.

interestingly, *Beowulf*, as an adaptation of medieval fantastical literature, occupies a middle ground between fantasy and reality.

*Kingdom of Heaven* presents a fictional account of the fall of the crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem between 1184 and 1187. *Beowulf* is not based upon medieval history, it is *of* medieval history, its source is an Anglo-Saxon heroic epic poem composed orally and first written down in the early eleventh century. The trilogy that is the source material for *The Lord of the Rings* films is neither medieval literature nor medieval history, having been written between 1937 and 1949, incidentally, however, by a medievalist. Indeed it is difficult to say whether a reader without this knowledge would be able to distinguish the world of *The Lord of the Rings* from that of a romance or epic written during the Middle Ages like *Beowulf*, *Huon de Bordeaux* or *El Cantar de Mio Çid*. In fact, even *with* that knowledge it is a question whether they would interpret them differently. If a film were to be made of one of these romances, would the public appreciate it differently than a film based upon a more recent work of fantasy? *The Lord of the Rings* employs many of the same tropes, archetypes and narrative structures that exist in medieval epics and romances. This will be explored further in the next chapter.

### **Limitations of the design**

All studies have limitations and every design raises possible challenges to its validity. It is the job of the researcher to mitigate these limitations and answer these challenges wherever possible.

In the case of this study, the sample raises some questions in terms of validity. As David Morrison says, 'Due to the peculiarity of their experience, students cannot be taken to say anything about wider populations'.<sup>153</sup> Though this is possibly a limitation, this study, by itself, is not intended to be extrapolated to the public at large, since that would require either a quantitative component or further qualitative work that is verifiably exhaustive. Neither of these were possible with the budget, time or scope available to this project.

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<sup>153</sup> Morrison, p. 196.

This lack of the ability to generalise its findings does not, however, mean that the study is of limited significance, or so inherently flawed to have not been worth undertaking. Rather, it is meant as an exploratory exercise, a sociological 'grab sample', uncovering a section of interpretations and offering preliminary conclusions which may steer further research. If there are commonalities found in the interpretations amongst these students, then that justifies testing these results against those from other social groups, potentially defined by age, class, education or nationality. It was not expected (and would be quite shocking if true) that all subjects, even amongst a limited sample, have identical interpretations. If they were, it could raise important validity concerns. Where common consistencies and peculiarities exist, they indicate fertile grounds for further research, and potentially the genesis of new theoretical explorations of how the public comes to understand its past.

By necessity, this study also includes individuals only from Britain. British people may have different responses from individuals of other nationalities; this is worth future study. Since the films in this case study were all financed by American production companies and typically produced to appeal to an American audience (as theirs is the largest market share), a comparison study of English and American audiences could potentially be extremely fruitful, but beyond the scope of this thesis. This will be explored further in chapter 8.

Another limitation to this study is its restriction to three films. Although the three selected are both popular and representative of different sub-genres, they are but three of many. Because of this, it is again not possible to extrapolate from the results to the entire corpus of medieval film. However, it is hoped that the similarities and differences between these three films may be explored more broadly in terms of genre and sub-genre in future research.

The focus of this study is the audience's interpretation of what they have seen in the immediate aftermath of having seen a film. As time passes, however, an individual's schema can veer in the direction of their preconceptions, sociocultural norms and expectations, and so away from their original experience. This limits the scope of the study somewhat, as further research

could be done which traces reception over a period of time after the original viewing. That too is beyond the scope of what follows here.

The films were shown to each group in the same order: *Beowulf* first, *Kingdom of Heaven* second and *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* third. Showing the films in this order may have had an effect on participants' interpretation of the latter films. Consistency of method was judged to be a higher concern than this possible effect.

The study did not distinguish between individuals who had previously seen the films and those who had not. Though this was recorded, there did not seem to be any compelling reason to separate those who had some experience with the film already from the rest of the group. Indeed, the exclusion of those who had already seen the film would have run the undesirable risk of eliminating those very individuals who are of most interest to this thesis.

## Chapter 4: The films

This chapter introduces the three films shown to the focus groups: *Beowulf*, *Kingdom of Heaven*, and *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*. These films were chosen on the basis of their financial success, using this as an indication of their popularity and therefore their public impact. However, each film also bears characteristics that contrast with the others and make it worth further exploration. This chapter will explore those characteristics and the theoretical issues that the selection of these films presents. It will also provide an introduction to each film, a plot synopsis, and an exploration of its historical and/or literary sources. Finally, it will analyse some of the unique features of each film in order to contextualise statements made by participants (which will be discussed in chapters 5, 6 and 7).

### *Beowulf*

[...] the poet had felt his way through the inherited material – the fabulous elements and the traditional accounts of an heroic past – and by a combination of creative intuition and conscious structuring had arrived at a unity of effect and a balanced order.<sup>154</sup>

Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*

Heaney is referring to the anonymous *Beowulf* poet (and also to himself as poet, adaptor and translator). However, his statement can also describe any filmmaker attempting to adapt *Beowulf* for the screen. This section explores how the filmmakers, like their historical counterparts, felt their way through material they inherited. It examines the film as an adaptation of its historical source as well as exploring the cutting-edge techniques used to render the early medieval world for a twenty-first-century audience.

*Beowulf* was directed by Robert Zemeckis and adapted from the original Anglo-Saxon poem by Neil Gaiman and Roger Avary. This version of *Beowulf* is a part of a resurgent popular interest in the Anglo-Saxon epic over the past fifteen years. In 1999, Seamus Heaney's new verse

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<sup>154</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation (Bilingual Edition)* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2001), pp. xi-xii.



translation of the work became a surprise best seller.<sup>155</sup> Two film adaptations were released in the same year: *The Thirteenth Warrior* (an adaptation of Michael Crichton's *The Eaters of the Dead*, a reimagining of *Beowulf*) and a science-fiction version entitled: *Beowulf*.<sup>156</sup> Following these, an Icelandic-Canadian independent film, *Beowulf and Grendel*, was released in 2005, and in 2009, the film *Outlander* reimagined Beowulf and Grendel as extra-terrestrials crash-landing in a Viking village.<sup>157</sup> None of these four film adaptations were critically or financially successful. However, in spite of these previous unprofitable attempts to adapt the poem into a popular film, the 2007 *Beowulf* has succeeded financially. It has outstripped all other *Beowulf* adaptations combined and was the third-most financially successful medieval film in the UK from 2000 to 2009.<sup>158</sup>

*Beowulf* begins in 'Denmark, A.D. 507' (as reads the opening title card). King Hrothgar of the Danes is opening a new mead hall that he names Heorot. Upon the first night of drunken debauchery, the hall is assaulted by the monstrous Grendel, a troll who eats men and women, wreaks ruin and disappears. The mead hall is closed. Upon hearing the news, Beowulf travels over the sea to fight the monster. Beowulf is a boastful braggart, but upon battling the beast naked and without weapons (since the monster is similarly armed) Beowulf ultimately tears its arm off and leaves it for dead. In vengeance, Grendel's demonic mother attacks Heorot. Beowulf in turn seeks the mother in her lair, and discovers that the creature is a monstrous seductress. She successfully entices Beowulf into a deal: he can have a kingdom, power and fame in exchange for giving her his gold dragon-shaped horn and, by laying with her, a new son. Upon learning Beowulf's secret, Hrothgar realises that he is free from the deal he made with the demon years ago that spawned Grendel. Hrothgar promptly kills himself. Beowulf is given Hrothgar's crown, land, hall and queen. Many years pass. Beowulf has become an old king, has taken a young mistress and is reduced to

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<sup>155</sup> Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*.

<sup>156</sup> Crichton's *Eaters of the Dead* was originally published in 1976. Michael Crichton, *Eaters of the Dead* (London: Harper, 1976). Graham Baker, *Beowulf* (Dimension, 1999). McTiernan and Crichton. In this thesis, the term *Beowulf* describes the 2007 Robert Zemeckis film. If referring to the 1999 Baker film, it will be described as *Beowulf (1999)*.

<sup>157</sup> Sturla Gunnarsson, *Beowulf & Grendel* (Starz / Anchor Bay, 2005); Howard McCain, *Outlander* (Momentum Pictures, 2009).

<sup>158</sup> 'Beowulf (2007) - Box Office Mojo', *Box Office Mojo*  
<<http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=beowulf.htm>> [accessed 22 May 2010].

fighting petty wars with local tribes. One day a slave finds Beowulf's golden dragon-horn, and returns it to the king. In response, the kingdom is assaulted by a dragon, which is revealed to be Beowulf's son. Beowulf does battle with the dragon, and sacrifices his own life to achieve its death. Beowulf's trusted lieutenant Wiglaf finds the king dying on the beach, and is given the kingdom. The film closes with Grendel's mother making an overture to the new king, possibly beginning the cycle anew.

### **The elder *Beowulf***

Of the three films examined in this study, *Beowulf* has the oldest source material. It is the only one which is an adaptation of an early medieval text: one of the oldest surviving stories in the English language. The medieval poem *Beowulf* poses several challenges to the adaptor. Firstly, the poem requires translation, since the Old English of *Beowulf* bears little similarity to modern English. Many translations of *Beowulf* exist in prose and in verse, and each has a slightly different interpretation and focus.<sup>159</sup> Narratologically, the poem offers few similarities with contemporary novels or poetry. It is fractured, with two (or three) loosely-related episodes. It provides little character description, frequently references myths and legends unfamiliar to modern readers, and the story lopes along at a slow tread due to the elliptical style of the verse, rarely pausing to explain itself.<sup>160</sup> Why the characters act in the way that they do and why the story plays out as it does is left mostly unanswered, and gaps in the internal logic of the story lie unaddressed.

To many Anglo-Saxonists, these difficulties are virtues. The poem's obliqueness, shadowy sense of fate and foreboding, simplicity of narrative and complexity of intertextual references combine to form a window on a lost oral tradition of gods, monsters and glorious heroes. But

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<sup>159</sup> For *Beowulf* in Old English, I use: Friedrich Klaeber, *Klaeber's Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. by Robert Dennis Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, 4th edn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008). For a translated version, I use: 'Beowulf', in *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature*, ed. by Joseph Laurence Black and others, trans. by Roy Luizza (Plymouth: Broadview Press, 2006), pp. 38-84.

<sup>160</sup> Brian Branston, *The Lost Gods of England* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1957), pp. 3-17; L. V. Grinsell, 'Wayland the Smith and His Relatives: A Legend and Its Topography', *Folklore*, 102 (1991), 235-236. Some of the mythological episodes referenced in *Beowulf*, such as that of Wayland the Smith, are also found depicted on the seventh-century Franks Casket.

those literary virtues do not translate onto the screen. The invention of the novel is often tied to a focus on individual, personal narratives. Similarly the realist dramas of Chekhov, Ibsen and Shaw foreground character psychology and motivation, which have since become *de rigueur* elements in any satisfying drama. Modern fantasies are required to be sufficiently psychologically truthful to allow for the willing suspension of disbelief and empathy on the part of the spectator.

### **Adapting the poem to screen**

Avery and Gaiman's adaptation of the poem weaves an intricate narrative about what it means to be monstrous. It also contains a sub-narrative about the power and dangers of storytelling. This is characteristic of Gaiman's oeuvre, where the characters are frequently storytellers, participating in stories which are fundamentally about the act of storytelling.<sup>161</sup> In a number of scenes, the film destabilises the authority of Beowulf (and thus the text), by setting him up as an untrustworthy narrator. For all his heroism, the hero of the film is a braggart – a spinner of great tales about his exploits – unlike his literary counterpart (though a perceptive, if simplistic, depiction of the Anglo-Saxon preoccupation with heroic commemoration).<sup>162</sup> For example, when Beowulf recounts the swimming race with Breca, the scene shifts to a narrated flashback. Beowulf describes the swimming race as the audience is being shown it: a storm arises, a pack of giant sea-serpents attacks and Beowulf deals out death with his dagger. At the end of the battle with the monsters Beowulf is pulled under the water by an eerily beautiful mermaid. The narrator-Beowulf continues, but omits the mermaid. Instead, he haltingly claims he was pulled under by another sea monster and (in an obvious Freudian joke) 'killed the monster with my own blade and plunged it into its heart'. Beowulf is shown dropping the dagger as the scene cuts back to the present. In

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<sup>161</sup> For examples of Gaiman's work which features stories about storytellers and storytelling, see: Neil Gaiman, *American Gods: A Novel* (Ossining, NY: Hill House, 2004); Neil Gaiman, *Anansi Boys* (New York: William Morrow, 2005); Neil Gaiman, *The Sandman*, 10 vols (New York: DC Comics, 1991).

<sup>162</sup> In the poem, Beowulf conducts himself politely and with respect. Though he presents his credentials as a monster-slayer with confidence, he lacks the swaggering bravado that the film endows him with. Bernard F. Huppé, *The Hero in the Earthly City: A Reading of Beowulf*, *Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies*, v. 33 (Binghamton: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1984), pp. 14-15.

short, the visuals show that the narrator-Beowulf is lying. Rather than losing the swimming race to Breca because of his heroic battle with the monsters, he did so because of his tragic flaw: lust. To further complicate matters, after Beowulf finishes his tale he is asked how many monsters he killed. His reply: 'nine'. Immediately, Wiglaf whispers in the back of the hall, 'last time it was three'.

Which is the truth? The voiced narration is shown to be a lie. But if Wiglaf is to be believed, neither is the visual depiction, for it showed more than three sea-monsters. The film recasts the original poem as if it is Beowulf's mostly unreliable version of his own story. The poem reads: 'þæt ic mid sweorde ofslōh / niceras nigene'.<sup>163</sup> This is an interesting subversion of the usual trope of film versions of historical legends. Often films (or their marketing) make claims that they present 'the real story behind' popular myths and legends (a pedigree claimed by both *The Thirteenth Warrior* and *Beowulf and Grendel*). The writers of *Beowulf* are aware of this and playfully present a more complex, unstable view of the authority of both the original poem and the film. The film self-consciously engages with the poem in a way that acknowledges that both are a part of a long evolutionary oral tradition where no version has more claim to the truth, in spite of the application of the scribe's pen or the filmmaker's camera.

### **The history of, and in, *Beowulf***

The film, like the poem, can be split roughly into three parts, each focusing on a battle with a monster: Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon. However, in the film, as in the original poem, a chronological rift is evident between the second and third monster. After the confrontation between Beowulf and Grendel's mother, the action shifts forward in time '*fiftig wintr(a)*'.<sup>164</sup> Beowulf is now an old king. He is called again to don the armaments of a hero to do battle with a monster for what proves to be one final time.<sup>165</sup> Unlike all previous film and TV

<sup>163</sup> Then I had slain with my sword / nine sea-monsters. My translation, ln. 574-75. Klaeber, p. 22.

<sup>164</sup> Fifty winters, l.2209, Klaeber, p. 75.

<sup>165</sup> The final episode, in which an elderly *Beowulf* relives his youth by doing battle one final time is a narrative trope which has been echoed recently. Over the past ten years, a number of aging action film

versions of the poem, Zemeckis' *Beowulf* retains this final act. Though the breadth of the rift is not made explicit in the film, its effects are clear: not only have the characters aged, but the world is significantly different. Whereas Beowulf battled Grendel in something architecturally and culturally resembling the Early Middle Ages, he fights the dragon in a period that evokes the High Middle Ages.<sup>166</sup>

Although this anachronistically compresses hundreds of years of socio-cultural change into the space of half a century, the changing world of the film makes reference to the fact that the original poem is itself a product, and depiction, of many different times. The only existing copy of *Beowulf* was written by two different scribes, each in a different scribal hand.<sup>167</sup> Only during a few decades were both hands in use simultaneously. This palaeographical peculiarity has made dating the manuscript unusually precise, as argued in a seminal work on the poem, *Klaeber's Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg*: 'The likeliest date for the construction of the manuscript thus falls in the first decade of the eleventh century, though a dating a few years earlier or later is not impossible'.<sup>168</sup> The dating of the poetry itself is another matter entirely. Klaeber concludes that there is evidence to support the likelihood that the extant manuscript was copied from an earlier manuscript rather than composed by the scribe or transcribed from a speaker. There is also lexical and textual evidence that points to a possible first scribing of the poem at some point in the seventh or eighth century (and, since the poem seems to allude to events in the sixth century, gives at least those elements of the story a *terminus post quem*).<sup>169</sup> On the other hand there is some evidence which suggests that the first writing was more contemporaneous with the date of

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stars have taken up their previous roles one last time (often seemingly as an attempt to reinvigorate a struggling career or as a way of bringing a new audience, and new income, to an established, if mothballed franchise). Often these films, like the final episode of *Beowulf*, explore issues of aging, mortality, and have a distinctly elegiac tone. Examples of this include *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003), *Rocky Balboa* (2006), *Die Hard 4* (2007), *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008), and *Rambo* (2008).

<sup>166</sup> The digital modelling techniques used in the film were instrumental in creating the fifty year rift, as it allowed the filmmakers to age the actors without resorting to the makeup and prosthetics typically used for this purpose. Unfortunately, the differences as seen in the film are merely cosmetic; the characters, though they look somewhat older, do not seem older, they still move and sound the same as their younger counterparts.

<sup>167</sup> Klaeber, p. xxvii.

<sup>168</sup> Klaeber, p. xxvii.

<sup>169</sup> Klaeber, pp. clxii-clxiv.

the extant manuscript in the early eleventh century. There is therefore not enough evidence conclusively to date the composition of the poem except within that demi-millennial span.<sup>170</sup> It is also impossible reliably to date any version of an oral *ur-Beowulf* (if one even existed), or to trace that possible oral lineage conclusively.

Like most Old English poetry, the words of the poem are likely the product of a centuries-old oral storytelling tradition that could have roots much further back than the extant manuscript. The filmmakers of *Beowulf* clearly knew something of the proposed dates of origin. By setting their film in 'Denmark, A.D. 507', they proclaim to scholars (or audiences familiar with *Beowulf* scholarship) that what they are showing is a possible version of the *ur-Beowulf* story. In an interview, Neil Gaiman said of the adaptation process, 'As we wrote it, we tried to be very faithful to the poem and to the characters in the poem, whilst assuming that maybe there were things that were happening off stage, and that maybe some of the things that were being told had eroded over time, or sometimes people had lied'. To this, Avary (who was also being interviewed) responded: 'I'm not entirely sure that our version of Beowulf wasn't the original version'.<sup>171</sup> Whether meant jokingly or not, Avary is conscious of the fact that they have presented a story that is a possible, though not entirely comfortable, version of the *ur-Beowulf*.

One notable feature of the original poem is how it interacts with its past, particularly in relation to the cultural and religious change that occurred between the *ur-Beowulf's* composition and the scribing of *Beowulf*. As Klaeber argues, *Beowulf* 'seems to bridge the two worlds of oral-traditional lore and Latin, Christian learning'.<sup>172</sup> In the poem there is a tension evident between the Christian present of the poet and his audience and the pagan past of the time in which *Beowulf* is set. There are a number of Biblical references; for example, Grendel and his mother are referred to as being '*in Caines cynne*'.<sup>173</sup> In some early medieval Christian and Hebraic traditions,

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<sup>170</sup> Klaeber, pp. clxii-clxiv.

<sup>171</sup> Sheila Roberts, 'Cast of Beowulf Interview - MoviesOnline', *Movies Online.ca* <[http://www.moviesonline.ca/movienews\\_13362.html](http://www.moviesonline.ca/movienews_13362.html)> [accessed 3 May 2010].

<sup>172</sup> Klaeber, p. clxii.

<sup>173</sup> In Cain's Kin. My translation, In. 107. Klaeber, p. 6.

all monsters of the earth were created by the children of Cain copulating with fallen angels.<sup>174</sup> The *Beowulf* poet recounts this story in lines 107-114, including, amongst Cain's kin, many supernatural creatures from the Anglo-Saxon tradition, including *ylfe* (elves), *orcnēas* (orcs), *gīgantas* (giants) and *eotenas* (giants, cognate with the Old Norse 'jötunn'):

*In Caines cynne þone cwealm gewræc  
 ēce drihten þæs þe hē Ābel slōg  
 ne gefeah hē þære fæhðe ac hē hine feor forwræc  
 metod for þy māne man-cynne fram  
 Panon untydras ealle onwōcon  
 eotenas and ylfes and orcnēas,  
 swylce gīgantas þā wið gode wunnon  
 lange þrāge hē him þæs lēan forgeald (107-114)*<sup>175</sup>

This listing is rare, and as Alaric Hall argues, 'Anglo-Saxon literature offers little in the way of explicit cosmography; what is there is based on Christian theology. *Beowulf*, however, is rich in implicit cosmology'.<sup>176</sup> Tolkien argues that the description of Grendel's form in the poem is a hybrid between a pre-Christian and Christian understanding of monsters:

The changes which produced (before A.D. 1066) the mediaeval devil are not complete in *Beowulf*, but in Grendel change and blending are, of course, already apparent. [...] Monsters of more or less human shape were naturally liable to development on contact with Christian ideas of sin and spirits of evil. Their parody of human form (*earmsceapen on weres wæstmum*) becomes symbolical, explicitly, of sin.<sup>177</sup>

<sup>174</sup> Charles Donahue, 'Grendel and the Clanna Cain', *Journal of Celtic Studies*, 1 (1950), 167-175. The fullest catalogue of the Cain legends in early medieval literature remains: Oliver F. Emerson, 'Legends of Cain, Especially in Old and Middle English', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 21 (1906), 831-929 (pp. 878-91). For a recent exploration of the monsters in *Beowulf*, see: Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995).

<sup>175</sup> Among Cain's race – when he killed Abel / the eternal Lord avenged that death. No joy in that feud- the Maker forced him / far from mankind for his foul crime. From thence arose all misbegotten things, trolls and elves and the living dead, and also the giants who strove against God / for a long while – He gave them their reward for that. (107-114) Black and others, pp. 38-84 (p. 40). Some of the supernatural creatures in *The Lord of the Rings* take their names from these Anglo-Saxon 'kin of Cain' as well. Elves are a special case; here, they are listed among the monstrous kin of Cain. But as Hall argues, their 'usage here is diametrically contrary to the early Old Norse and Old English alignment of *álfar/aelfe* with the human in-group against the monsters'. In the cosmology of Tolkien's fiction, elves are aligned with humans against the monsters, which implies that Tolkien may have based his elves on this older alignment rather than the one seen in *Beowulf*. Alaric Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England: Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity*, Anglo-Saxon Studies, 8 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), p. 71.

<sup>176</sup> Alaric Hall, p. 69.

<sup>177</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics', in *Interpretations of Beowulf: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Robert Dennis Fulke (London: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 14-44 (p. 36). 'The people of the Geats then prepared for him / a splendid pyre upon the earth', ll. 3137-38. Black and others, pp. 38-84 (p. 79).

This is complemented by a number of references to other pre-Christian myths, philosophies and religious practices. For instance, there are four funerals in *Beowulf*; the first is the archetypal pagan boat-burial of Scyld at the opening of the poem (lines 26-52). The remaining three feature burning of the dead, a practice to which Christians objected (lines 1107-24, 2124-7 and 3137-55) and which had already been largely abandoned in southern Britain by the end of the sixth century AD.<sup>178</sup> The poem also makes frequent references to *wyrd*, a traditional Anglo-Saxon concept of unavoidable fate which must be faced with equally grim determination, which is rooted firmly in the pre-Christian Anglo Saxon culture. Therefore, it would seem that over the course of the poem's history Christian references intermingled with Pagan ones. This is likely to have occurred when the poem was written down (if not before) since at that time only a Christian religious house would have the capability to produce a manuscript such as *Beowulf*.

The multi-layered quality of the original is referenced in the Zemeckis film version by the cultural change which occurs during the fifty winters after Beowulf's coronation. Before Beowulf becomes king, the local religion is a waning Paganism to which Hrothgar will not pay homage. It is only mentioned once outside of the occasional colourful expletive such as Wiglaf's 'Odin's swifan balls!' In a scene following Grendel's first assault, Unferth asks Hrothgar 'My king, for deliverance our people sacrifice goats and sheep to Odin and Heimdall. With your permission, shall we also pray to the new Roman god Christ Jesus? Perhaps he can lift our affliction.' To this, Hrothgar replies 'Ah. No, Unferth, no. The gods will do nothing for us that we will not do for ourselves. What we need is a hero'. Christianity is new but on the rise; the film places itself historically by Unferth's reference to Jesus as a new Roman god. Since hegemonic Christian power and worship in Europe is a commonly-understood feature of the Middle Ages (as will be explored further in chapters 7 and 8), for the audience this exchange specifically places this portion of the film before or at the dawn of the Middle Ages.

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<sup>178</sup> Klaeber, p. lxxii; Sam Lucy, *The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death: Burial Rites in Early England* (Stroud: Sutton, 2000); J. M. Bond, 'Burnt Offerings: Animal Bone in Anglo-Saxon Cremations', *World Archaeology*, 28 (1996), 76-88.



By contrast, after Beowulf becomes king Christianity becomes the dominant religion. No more references are made to Pagan gods; queen Wealtheow wears a cross. Most significantly, Unferth has become priest for the outlying village. The film betrays a negative perspective of early Christianity through the depiction of its most fervent proponent, Unferth. In the opening scene, the audience is shown Unferth trying to convert one of his fellows while they are both urinating, 'this is how it works, Athel, after you die, you wouldn't really be dead, providing you've accepted him as the one and only god'. Using this as a tactic for conversion is strange in that pre-Christian beliefs among Germanic-speakers seem also to have had a concept of an afterlife, so Unferth's promise of eternal life would not in reality seem uniquely appealing. Unferth's later cowardice in the face of Grendel, drunken antagonism of Beowulf and violent cruelty to his slave (named, interestingly, Cain) –particularly after Unferth becomes a priest– also implies that Christianity, even at its outset, was morally bankrupt. When Unferth is eventually disfigured by the dragon and brought to Beowulf borne on a cross and shouting the well-known Old Testament reference that 'the sins of the fathers [will be visited upon the sons]' the audience is not expected to feel pity.<sup>179</sup> Finally, Beowulf himself seems to echo the poem's elegiac tone, mourning the loss of heroes and their replacement with Christian morals: 'The time of heroes is dead, the Christ God has killed it, leaving humankind with nothing but weeping martyrs, fear and shame'. Though *Beowulf* depicts the conversion of a medieval society from one religion to another, neither are portrayed in a positive light; both religions are unable to save their worshippers from the monsters that plague them. The only difference is cultural; whereas the Pagan society venerated heroes and heroism, in Christian society Beowulf must be martyred in order to be heroic.

The film's cultural change is also reflected in the built environment. At the opening of the film, the setting of *Beowulf* conforms to the archetypal image of early medieval architecture: a

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<sup>179</sup> The trope of the sins of the fathers being visited upon the sons is found in Exodus 20:5, Deuteronomy 5:9, Lamentations 5:7, Numbers 14:18, and Jeremiah 32:17.

village on a hill surrounded by a palisade, with a large hall as its focus.<sup>180</sup> All of these are built of wood. After the previously-discussed fifty year gap, the film shows the landscape beginning to change. The hall has transformed into a hypermedieval fantasy castle, with pointed turrets and flying walkways built of stone. There is no longer only one village breaking a barren landscape; the original city now has an outlying village of its own. The arrival and adoption of Christianity is even displayed in the landscape; the outlying village is now centred on a church rather than a mead hall.

Finally, the form of the monsters themselves may reflect a change from the Pagan Iron Age to the Christian Middle Ages. Grendel is a monstrous malformed humanoid, a giant reminiscent of the *jötnar* from the collection of Scandinavian religious literature, the *Poetic Edda*.<sup>181</sup> However, the monster that arises to threaten the kingdom after Beowulf becomes king takes the form of the monster most often associated with the Middle Ages in popular culture: a dragon. While the literature and mythology of the early Middle Ages (including, notably, *Beowulf*) contained dragons and dragon-like creatures, they became popularised in high and late medieval romance literature. The vast majority of the parallels for the dragon in *Beowulf* are indeed medieval saints' lives.<sup>182</sup> Furthermore, they have since become a staple of medievalist fantasy and fairy tale. They have become one of the most recognisable icons of the Middle Ages. As a result, even though the dragon is a part of the original story, in the film it also acts as another symbol of the change from pre- or early-medieval society to that of the iconic high and late Middle Ages.

### ***Beowulf*: The monsters and the sex**

The most radical departure from the original poem is the inclusion of a unifying narrative which makes the dangers of sex central to the film. In the poem, Beowulf is notably asexual - he never

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<sup>180</sup> The settings of *The Thirteenth Warrior*, *Beowulf and Grendel* and *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (the latter in the depiction of the kingdom of Rohan) fit this image and may have influenced the architecture of Heorot as seen in *Beowulf*.

<sup>181</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Carolyne Larrington (Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>182</sup> Christine Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon: Parallels and Analogues* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 52-88.

marries, has children or expresses sexual desire. In the film, Beowulf and Hrothgar (as well as many of Beowulf's thanes) share lust, especially for extramarital sex, as their central tragic flaw. The stories of Beowulf and Hrothgar are shown to mirror one another. Hrothgar is depicted as the lustful king who sired Grendel with the demonic Grendel's mother, who dedicates Heorot to 'merrymaking, joy and fornication', and who is shown with two giggling, nude mistresses that run from the glare of the Queen. Queen Wealtheow will not copulate with her husband because, as she says: 'How can I ever lay with you... knowing you laid with her [Grendel's mother]?'<sup>183</sup> When Beowulf slays Grendel and inherits Heorot, he too succumbs to Grendel's mother's seduction, acquires a young mistress and seems incapable of siring an heir. In each case, extra-marital lust leads to the begetting not of heirs but monstrous bastards and ultimately, death. The female characters can be defined through their sexual roles as well; the wise woman who abstains from sex (Wealtheow), the young foolish women who offer sex freely (Beowulf's and Hrothgar's mistresses) and the wicked woman who solicits sex for nefarious ends (Grendel's mother).

Additionally, though male and referred to as 'son', both the monsters lack genitalia. The shooting script shows this is not accidental or merely an attempt to placate the censors:

WIGLAF slides under Grendel and strikes at its groin with his sword, breaking the blade on the creature's tough skin.

WIGLAF (CONT'D)

(flabbergasted)

The swifan bastard has no pintel!!!

Indeed, Grendel has been neutered long ago.<sup>184</sup>

Additionally, the human form of the shape-shifting dragon is depicted as a naked, gold man with all the muscular definition of a Greek statue, but lacking genitals. In this film, the half-breed monsters are made other by virtue of the fact that they are a product of, but not beholden to, the central driving force of the human medieval world as it is depicted in the film: sexual desire.

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<sup>183</sup> Neil Gaiman and Roger Avary, *Beowulf: The Script Book* (New York: HarperEntertainment, 2007). Robert Zemeckis, *Beowulf* (Shangri-La Entertainment, 2007).

<sup>184</sup> Gaiman and Avary, p. 40.

Since sex is so pervasive in the film, the characters are depicted in a way that is intended to provoke a visceral response from the audience. In the opening scene, the audience recoils from Hrothgar's blubbery frame, especially on the occasions when his improvised toga threatens to fall off. Beowulf gratuitously disrobes when preparing to fight Grendel, revealing a vision of the idealised masculine physique (though his penis is always hidden with a strategically and sometimes comically phallic object).

However, no character is designed to inspire a more visceral response than Grendel's mother. The film interweaves the poem's episodic monstrous triptych into a single cohesive story about the seductive danger of power with Grendel's mother at its centre. It trades the poem's episodic structure for a cyclical one, in which Grendel's mother sutures the poem's rift between Beowulf as a young hero and Beowulf as an old king. Roger Avary recounted his discomfort with the episode featuring Beowulf's mother in the original poem which led to this revision in the film:

When Beowulf emerges from the cave after his time down there with her, he comes out with the head of Grendel, not the head of the mother. We never are actually told the battle as a direct part of the story,<sup>185</sup> which is really strange, structurally. Instead, Beowulf comes out of the cave and he tells the story [...]. I always felt that was somewhat suspicious. He comes out with no evidence that he's killed the mother, tells the story that we were not actually privy to seeing [...]. I started thinking, maybe Beowulf is not entirely reliable.<sup>186</sup>

So, as a result, Beowulf's tale of the encounter in the poem is made a lie in the film. Beowulf's mother is recast as monstrous seductress, the vehicle for the above-discussed themes of dangerous sex and the sins of the fathers being visited upon the sons. The film implies that this cycle extends far into the past when Hrothgar alludes to slaying a dragon in his youth. The film also ends on an ambiguous note; the audience is left with the image of Wiglaf as a newly-crowned king on the brink of continuing another monstrous generation with Grendel's mother.

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<sup>185</sup> This is not actually true. In the text of *Beowulf* the fight with Grendel's mother is told directly in lines 1513-1569. It is interesting that Avary has a false memory of the poem upon which he has built his interpretation.

<sup>186</sup> 'The Beowulf Podcast: Roger Avary' <<http://www.beowulfthemovie.com>> [accessed 14 February 2008].

Grendel's mother is more than just a movie monster: she is an Everymonster that evokes ideas of the monstrous drawn from both historical mythology and modern popular culture. Her depiction, as an immortal, cannibalistic, cave-dwelling serpentine/human mother of monsters echoes Hesiod's description of Echidna, the Greek mythological mother of all monsters:

...half a nymph with glancing eyes and fair cheeks, and half again a huge snake, great and awful, with speckled skin, eating raw flesh beneath the secret parts of the holy earth. And there she has a cave deep down under a hollow rock' and 'who dies not nor grows old all her days.<sup>187</sup>

She also evokes the succubus tradition when she seduces *Beowulf* from within his dreams. Her bargain with Beowulf, as Beowulf confesses, is 'full of fine promises' that evoke the bargain in the Faust legend and subsequent deals with devils.<sup>188</sup> The few glimpses of her serpentine form bear a striking resemblance to a gold-plated version of H. R. Giger's alien, as made famous in the *Alien* movies, a contemporary pop-culture icon of the monstrous-maternal.<sup>189</sup> Her human form is provided by actress and sex-symbol Angelina Jolie, complete with a long sinuous braid evocative of her role as Lara Croft in the *Tomb Raider* films (and possibly a nod to the parallel between the *Tomb Raider* video-game and Beowulf's CGI).<sup>190</sup> She is nude, save for stiletto-heeled feet and strategically-placed dripping gold. Her emergence from the water is evocative both of Ursula Andress's familiar emergence from the sea in the first instalment in the James Bond franchise, *Dr. No*, and also the iconic scene from the 1998 film *Wild Things*, which has become famous for its depiction of sexually predatory young women.<sup>191</sup> She is an archetypal sexual fantasy designed to be pleasing to both Beowulf within the film and the audience who gaze on her through Beowulf's eyes. The multifaceted depiction of Grendel's mother brings together an intertextual web of high

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<sup>187</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, trans. by Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Cambridge, MA, 1914), lines 302-305 <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>> [accessed 22 December 2007].

<sup>188</sup> For more on the development of the Faust legend, especially from the Reformation, see: J. W. Smeed, *Faust in Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975); Osman Durrani, *Faust: Icon of Modern Culture* (Robertsbridge: Helm Information, 2004).

<sup>189</sup> H. R. Giger, *Giger's Alien*, 2nd edn (Morpheus International, 1994). Giger's Alien was originally designed for the 1979 Ridley Scott Film *Alien*, but the associations with the monstrous maternal are realised more fully with the character of the alien queen in the sequel, *Aliens*. Ridley Scott, *Alien* (20th Century Fox, 1979). James Cameron, *Aliens* (20th Century Fox, 1986).

<sup>190</sup> Simon West, *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (Paramount, 2001).

<sup>191</sup> Terence Young, *Dr. No* (MGM, 1963). John McNaughton, *Wild Things* (Sony Pictures, 1998).

and pop-culture references that evoke ideas of the sexual, the maternal, the predatory, and the demonic.

As a medievalist it is easy to find fault with the film *Beowulf*. When compared to the dense and sophisticated poem, it relies upon Hollywood clichés and depicts swaggering comic book ultra-masculinity. The poem's vision of Germanic heroic nobility is reduced to oversexed hypermedieval heroic barbarity. The film identifies Beowulf (and to a degree all the men in the film) as monstrous.<sup>192</sup> Unlike the Beowulf of the poem, the film gives the character a tragic flaw: lust for strength, power, glory, and women. When he rips off Grendel's arm, Beowulf barks, 'I am Ripper, Tearer, Slasher, Gouger! I am the teeth in the darkness, the talons in the night! Mine is strength ... and lust ... and power! I AM BEOWULF!' This act returns to haunt him, when, in clever narrative symmetry, Beowulf must sever his own arm in order to kill the dragon. His final heroic act is to ride out to face his monster rather than calling in a young hero to rid the world of his problem. Sadly, that sort of heroism garners no glory, only pity. Throughout, Queen Wealtheow looks on with stoic silence, bearing witness to the weakness that lays low all the men around her.

### ***Beowulf* in pixels**

It was a strange way to be making a film that should be dirty and muddy.<sup>193</sup>

Roger Avary

Another unique aspect of *Beowulf* is the way it was shot, making extensive use of computer graphic imaging (henceforth *CGI*) to render its world. CGI is commonplace in contemporary big-budget Hollywood films, especially those which aim to present times and places other than our

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<sup>192</sup> *Beowulf and Grendel* also included a postmodern variant on the theme of man-as-monster, where the monster was driven by revenge and ultimately revealed as no more monstrous than the humans. All the evils perpetrated in the film were caused by a breakdown of communication and understanding between people. The proposed equation that men are as bad as monsters, therefore monsters are as good as men, was not well executed.

<sup>193</sup> Gaiman and Avary, p. 140.

own. This can be due to budget constraints; rendering elements of a scene with CGI can be considerably cheaper than building them. If not due to budget, it allows filmmakers to achieve the impossible; at its most extreme, filmmakers can design worlds not only unfettered by budgets and construction schedules, but also freed from the laws of physics. Furthermore, CGI allows the filmmaker to create shots which are impossible to do using traditional camera work since in some cases, a camera is not required.

In spite the advantages of CGI, its use in films is not without pitfalls. The most notable of these is explained by the theory of the 'uncanny valley'. The uncanny valley was first described by Masahiro Mori in his article 'Bukimi no tani'. In it, Mori explains the discomfort felt by humans viewing facsimiles of humanity that are almost, but not quite, lifelike.<sup>194</sup> Though Mori originally developed his theory to apply to human-like robots, it has since been applied to computer-generated renderings of humans in films and video games.<sup>195</sup> For Mori, any robot made more human-like in its appearance and movement will elicit a more empathetic response from those humans who interact with it. However, there is a tipping point; when human-facsimiles become almost human the response becomes one of revulsion. Mori explains:

The prosthetic arm has achieved a degree of human verisimilitude on par with false teeth. But this kind of prosthetic hand is too real and when we notice it is prosthetic, we have a sense of strangeness. So if we shake the hand, we are surprised by the lack of soft tissue and cold temperature. In this case, there is no longer a sense of familiarity. It is uncanny.<sup>196</sup>

If the prosthetic limb were instead made to be completely indistinguishable from a real one it would be given a normal response. The uncanny valley therefore names the sharp switch from

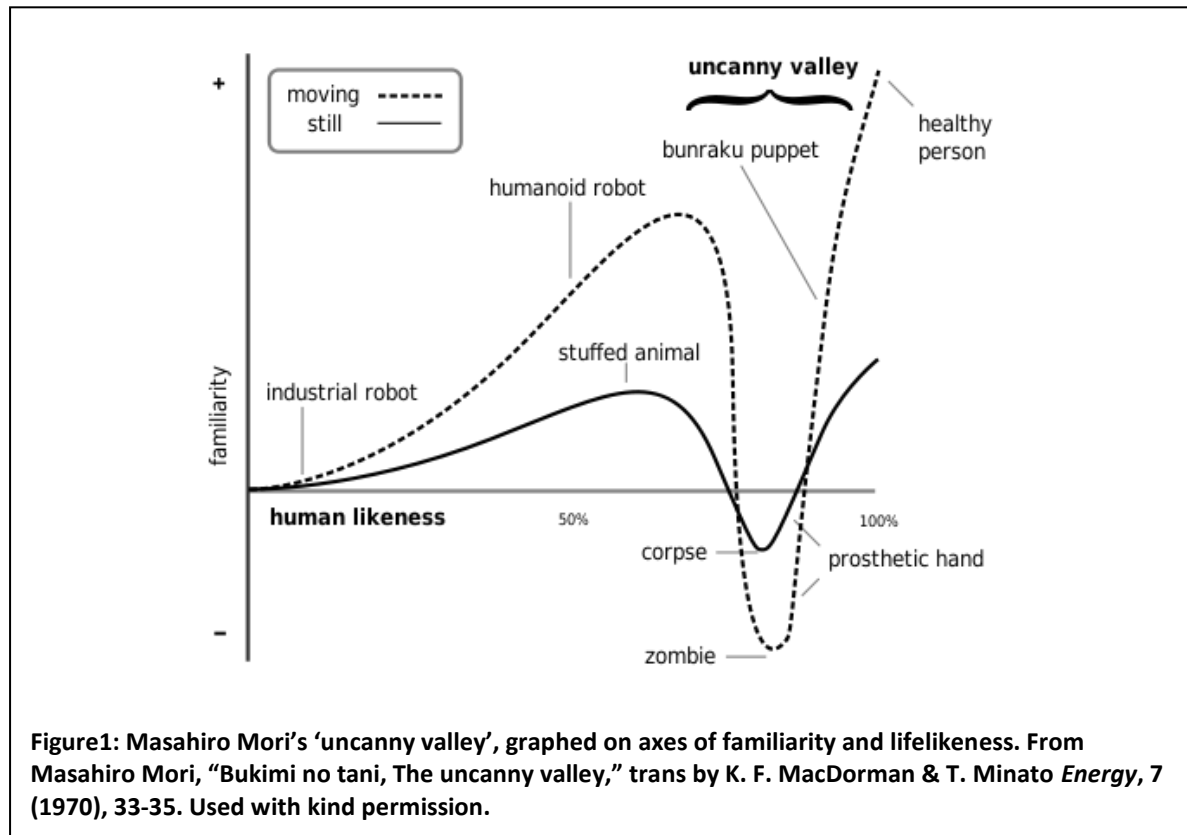
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<sup>194</sup> Masahiro Mori, "Bukimi no tani, The uncanny valley," trans by K. F. MacDorman & T. Minato *Energy*, 7 (1970), 33-35.

<sup>195</sup> For example: Angela Tinwell, Mark Grimshaw and Andrew Williams, 'Uncanny Behaviour in Survival Horror Games', *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, 2 (2010), 3-25; Saint John Walker, 'A Quick Walk Through Uncanny Valley', in *Modes of Spectating*, ed. by Alison Oddey and Christine White (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2009), pp. 29-40; Ben Serviss, 'Escaping the World: High and Low Resolution in Gaming', *IEEE Multimedia*, 12 (2005), 4-8; Paul Messaris, 'Viewers' Awareness of Digital F/X in Movies', in *Digital Media: Transformations in Human Communication*, ed. by Paul Messaris and Lee Humphreys (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2006), pp. 15-28.

<sup>196</sup> Mori, 33-35 (p. 34).

empathy to revulsion and back again when representations or facsimiles of humans are almost, but not quite, lifelike (see Figure 1).



The extensive use of computer animation in film begs the question whether or not an audience member's willingness to suspend disbelief is challenged by the use of these techniques. 'Willing suspension of disbelief' is a term first coined by Samuel Coleridge in his *Biographica Literaria* of 1817. Coleridge used the term to defend his use of the supernatural within his poetry, arguing that an audience should be expected to be able to enjoy the work in spite of the fact that it depicts things which are inherently impossible:

My endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.<sup>197</sup>

This concept has since been expanded from poetry to other art forms, especially the performing arts. However, this is contested ground; each audience member has a different amount of

<sup>197</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (American Book Exchange, 1881), p. 442.



Coleridge's 'poetic faith', and a different tolerance for authorial 'poetic license'. The limits of an individual's poetic faith is of paramount importance for my analysis as regards the fantastical elements within each film and how they relate to any potential learning from these films.

If extensive or poor use of CGI interrupts an audience's willing suspension of disbelief, how might that affect the process whereby they learn from a film? An audience member balking at poorly rendered CGI, or even noting its spectacle, might be less likely to assimilate what they are seeing on screen. If they do not believe the realism of what they see on screen, will they believe the history it represents?

The filmmakers of *Beowulf* make extensive and innovative use of CGI. All of the actors and environments are entirely rendered by computers. This technique, called 'performance capture' by Zemeckis and 'motion capture' more generally, is a mixture of traditional filming and animation. In order to create the final product, actors dressed in Lycra suits pocked with motion sensors played out the scenes on a specially designed sound stage (called 'The Volume' by Zemeckis).<sup>198</sup> Instead of being filmed by film or video cameras on this stage, the data from their suits were captured by a series of specially-designed cameras and transmitted to computers which recreated the motion in a three-dimensional environment<sup>199</sup>. In doing this, the filmmakers have complete control over the final product by manipulating the data within the computer. The shots and camera angles in the film are not the result of the positioning of a mechanical device, but the product of a computer which creates a virtual camera perspective. The movements of the actors (and, for all except Ray Winstone, their bodies and faces) provided only a base framework upon which the computer animators then layered flesh, skin and cloth.

Robert Zemeckis has become a vocal proponent of this completely computer-rendered technique, using it in all his recent films (previously in *The Polar Express* (2004) and the recent *A*

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<sup>198</sup> Robert Zemeckis, *A Hero's Journey: The Making of Beowulf* (Paramount Pictures, 2008); William Brown, 'Beowulf: The Digital Monster Movie', *Animation*, 4 (2009), 153-168 (pp. 153-155).

<sup>199</sup> Gaiman and Avery, pp. 140-141.

*Christmas Carol* (2009)).<sup>200</sup> Zemeckis notes, '[motion capture CGI] has allowed me to basically create any image that I could imagine. The movie is only limited by my imagination because I was able to do exactly that. If I said I think we should put a tree here, there it was. [...] I could get the camera where I wanted it to be without being limited by the physical world'.<sup>201</sup>

While Zemeckis' statement is accurate in terms of the flexibility this approach allows, as the restraints from the physical world are eased, its correlation to reality and the sense of realism becomes precarious. If a film is not grounded in the constraints of the physical world, people or objects are no longer required to behave in the expected way. In a less photorealistic film, such as an animated film, this would be acceptable as part of the natural order of the world of the film. However, *Beowulf's* CGI attempts to be hyper-realistic and produces images of virtual people, objects and environments that are sometimes indistinguishable from those in the real world. As a result, when they behave 'without being limited by the physical world' (as stated above), an uncanny valley of unease can be provoked in the viewer. The artifice of the technique becomes apparent, and a sense of alienation may be provoked.

In *Beowulf* the actors and environments are occasionally rendered in ways that seem photorealistic, especially when they do not move or speak; each hair is discernable, and in extreme close-up, so is each facial pore. However, in longer shots, or when the characters move or speak, the disjoint between the virtual and real world makes itself clear to the careful viewer: the lips and fingers do not seem to move in a completely natural way. *Beowulf* runs mechanically and flies through the air with the sort of weightless grace usually only seen in video games. Objects do not fall with a normal weight (understandable considering the actors were working with wire frames instead of props) and fabric does not hang from the body or pull in the chaotic way that it does naturally. Though the eyes are much improved from Zemeckis' earlier film *The Polar Express* (which was roundly criticised for the zombielike eyes of its characters), from time to time there is

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<sup>200</sup> Robert Zemeckis, *The Polar Express* (Castle Rock Entertainment, 2004); Robert Zemeckis, *A Christmas Carol* (Walt Disney Pictures, 2009).

<sup>201</sup> Anwar Brett, 'BBC Movies Interview, Robert Zemeckis', *BBC Movies Interview, Robert Zemeckis* <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2004/12/01/robert\\_zemeckis\\_the\\_polar\\_express\\_interview.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2004/12/01/robert_zemeckis_the_polar_express_interview.shtml)> [accessed 20 December 2009].

an eerie sense that there is no animating force behind the characters eyes.<sup>202</sup> Most interestingly, the head and voice of Beowulf were taken from Ray Winstone, whereas Alan Ritchson is credited as 'Animated Image/Beowulf' and Beowulf's sculpted physique was provided by fitness model Aaron Stephens.<sup>203</sup> The bodies and the head were stitched together in post-production as a seamless muscle-clad Frankenstein.

As discussed above, a further complicating factor to the sense of uncanny alienation is how central sex is to the film. The sex and titillation in *Beowulf* magnify the eerie effects of the uncanny valley and can further inspire a sense of alienation in the audience. The theory of the uncanny valley relies fundamentally upon the audience being asked to empathise with a more-or-less lifelike representation of a human. Characters that provoke instinctual revulsion in their audience due to falling into the uncanny valley would provoke even further revulsion if they are presented as sexually enticing. The filmmakers are asking the audience, thus, to desire something that is not quite human; either dead or never living. Understandably, this can amplify the feeling of discomfort in any audience watching *Beowulf* and disrupt their willing suspension of disbelief.

## Conclusion

Any interpretation of *Beowulf* must take into account a viewer's previous experience with the poem and their expectations of what a good adaptation might be. Some viewers may celebrate an adaptation's deviations from the original, others may lament them. Some may find CGI disturbing,

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<sup>202</sup> This problem of dead eyes was surmounted in the 2009 CGI film *Avatar* by the use of dedicated facial-mapping equipment that allowed the computers to represent the characters' eyes and upper facial areas with more detail than in Zemeckis' films. *Avatar* played upon this by including a narrative about the nature of seeing, and seeing with virtual eyes. The fictional race of the Na'avi use 'I see you' as a greeting, and the romantic narrative of the film culminates by the two protagonists exchanging this greeting. The marketing poster of the film (a close-up of a Na'avi eye) and the theme tune for the film ('I See You' by Leona Lewis) also play upon this narrative. Whether this was a subtle jab at Zemeckis' films is unknown. James Cameron, *Avatar* (20th Century Fox, 2009).

<sup>203</sup> The credit to Mr Stephens for the role of 'Beowulf Physique' has been removed from his IMDB listing and the IMDB listing of the film for reasons unknown. However this credit (and Mr Ritchson's) can be seen by accessing an archived IMDB page using the Internet Archive. All of the relevant credits can be found here: 'Internet Archive: IMDB Beowulf (2007)', 10 February 2007 <<http://web.archive.org/web/20070905003741/www.imdb.com/title/tt0442933/>> [accessed 1 May 2010].

yet others find it inconsequential. In further chapters of this thesis, the reactions of viewers to the film— as well as the reasons behind those reactions— will be explored.

### ***Kingdom of Heaven***

This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while.<sup>204</sup>

President George W. Bush, 16 September 2001

These battles cannot be viewed in any case whatsoever as isolated battles, but rather, as part of a chain of the long, fierce, and ugly crusader war.<sup>205</sup>

Osama bin Laden, 3 November 2001

### **Background of the film**

In comparison with the other two films in this study, *Kingdom of Heaven*<sup>206</sup> is a more conventional historical film. It portrays fictional versions of historical figures and events. It also conforms to many conventions of the historical epic genre. This does not mean that the film acts as an objective 'window into the past'; like any history (film or otherwise), it constructs its narrative around an interpretation of the past which is based upon the cultural position of the historian—in this case, the filmmakers. *Kingdom of Heaven*, however, goes further than interpreting the events of the past through the lens of the present. The filmmakers use the film to relate medieval and contemporary conflicts allegorically, and set up their interpretation of the Crusades as an anti-war parable for the twenty-first century. Though their source material is medieval, their message is not. Though their depiction of the material culture of the Middle Ages is precise (and therefore requires little comment), their depiction of medieval intellectual culture is severely skewed to

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<sup>204</sup> George W. Bush, 'Remarks by the President Upon Arrival: The South Lawn', *The White House, President George W. Bush*, 2001 <<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html>> [accessed 23 May 2010].

<sup>205</sup> 'Bin Laden Rails Against Crusaders and UN', *Bbc*, 3 November 2001, section Media reports <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/monitoring/media\\_reports/1636782.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/monitoring/media_reports/1636782.stm)> [accessed 23 May 2010].

<sup>206</sup> All analysis of this film will refer to the cinema release version of the film, rather than the subsequent 'extended edition' released on DVD in 2006. Though the extended edition includes new and extended scenes, I chose to use the version of the film which had been seen more commonly.

further their agenda. Ultimately, religious and political viewpoints typical of the Middle Ages are cast as the villains of the story, and the source for many of the problems of the period.

When it was created in 2005, *Kingdom of Heaven* was a rare foray into an historical period that Hollywood had not touched since 1954. The lack of contact in the interim was not because the period is unsuitable for cinematic interpretation. On the contrary, the Crusades seem ripe for film: an epic struggle between irreconcilable foes; a narrative rife with heroics and larger-than-life characters on both sides. Moreover, the public has been clearly interested in the period, as more academic and popular books have been published on the topic than any other period in medieval history. It seems likely that the dearth of filmic representations results from the controversial nature of the topic: rarely does a period of history, especially medieval history, seem so relevant and politically sensitive. Few time periods are able to inspire such violent and personal reactions.

It is difficult to discuss the Crusades in popular discourse with neutrality, since 'crusade' has been ideologically associated with the history of imperialism, colonialism, the 'war on terror' and religious evangelism. Since the late nineteenth century, the idea of the Crusades has been imbued with political power, viewed less as an ancient war with little contemporary relevance and more as a resurrected ancestor to the deepening international conflicts between Britain, the United States and their allies against the Islamic world. This is exacerbated by how easily the crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem can be mapped onto the modern state of Israel, and the unresolved tension between that country (as a US protégé) and her neighbors. As a result, the Crusades are often seen as a precedent or point of origin for contemporary conflicts between East and West, and Christianity and Islam. Instead of skirting potential controversy, *Kingdom of Heaven* appropriates these issues and adopts the ideological perspective that the Crusades were an inherently unjust ancestor for modern conflicts. The film employs this perspective on 'crusade' to construct a parable of the danger of religious war, both modern and medieval.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> 'Crusade' has also acquired another meaning that simply implies intense mobilisation or a sustained campaign against something, usually with religious or moral overtones. However, it is difficult to separate the two definitions, as the implications of the negative definition have begun to colour the public use of the

*Kingdom of Heaven* chronicles events during the fall of the Kingdom of Jerusalem during the years 1184 to 1187 by following the story of a fictionalised version of Balian of Ibelin (played by Orlando Bloom).<sup>208</sup> Balian begins his tale as a blacksmith in France, tortured by his wife's suicide, who follows his newfound father Godfrey (Liam Neeson) on crusade to achieve indulgence for his, and his wife's, sins. On the road, Godfrey is mortally wounded in a skirmish with men who wish to take Balian to trial for murdering a priest. Before he dies, Godfrey knights his son heir to the Barony of Ibelin. On the way to Jerusalem, Balian is shipwrecked and kills a Muslim whose master, Nasir (Alexander Siddig), takes him to Jerusalem in exchange for his freedom. The leprous King of Jerusalem, Baldwin IV (Edward Norton), knows he will die soon, and his throne will likely pass to his sister Sibylla's (Eva Green) husband, the aggressive and impetuous Guy de Lusignan (Marton Csokas). Count Tiberias (Jeremy Irons)<sup>209</sup> backs King Baldwin's vision of peace in the realm while renegade warlord Reynald de Chatillon (Brendan Gleeson) and the Templars back Guy's faction. Under King Baldwin the kingdom has struggled to maintain peace with its Muslim neighbours, but after Baldwin dies and Guy is crowned, Guy provokes the Muslims to open war. Count Tiberias and Balian alone refuse to join the war. Saladin easily defeats Guy and the army of the Kingdom of Jerusalem at the Horns of Hattin and then lays siege to Jerusalem. Balian takes command of the city's defences to protect its people from slaughter. Saladin assaults Jerusalem, but even after breaching the walls is unable to take the city. Balian negotiates with Saladin for the surrender of Jerusalem with the only condition being that all citizens are assured safe passage to Christian lands. Balian returns to his home in France with Sibylla at his side. There, crusaders led by King Richard of England seek him out and ask him to join them. Balian refuses, and he and Sibylla leave France, and the road back to Jerusalem, behind.

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second, for example in the backlash against Bush's use of the word in the first head quote. This second definition is explored more fully in chapter 8.

<sup>208</sup> Though Balian of Ibelin is recorded in William of Tyre's chronicle, most of the actions of the character are invented by the filmmakers. This will be discussed further below.

<sup>209</sup> The character called Count Tiberias in the film is an interpretation of the historical figure Raymond IV, who was Count of Tripoli and Tiberias during the events portrayed in the film. It is possible the filmmakers chose this name (in despite 'Tiberias' not being a medieval forename) to avoid confusion between Raymond and Reynald de Chatillon.

### **Criticising *Kingdom of Heaven*: The intersection of history and politics**

*Kingdom of Heaven* has been highly criticised by crusade historians for presenting an account of the fall of the Kingdom of Jerusalem which deviates from the historical record. Unlike many criticisms of historical films, however, some of their reasoning for criticising the film is not limited to their disagreement with the film's deviation from written histories, but also includes personal and political vitriol. For example, Jonathan Riley-Smith, the foremost crusades scholar at Cambridge, was asked about the content of the film before it was produced in an interview with *The Daily Telegraph*. He stated, 'It sounds absolute balls. It's rubbish. It's not historically accurate at all'.<sup>210</sup> While inflammatory, he is not wrong, as the film does not adhere to the histories that have been Riley-Smith's life-work. For example, Balian's story prior to the siege of Jerusalem, including his affair with Sibylla, is a fabrication. The other characters in the film are exaggerated into melodramatic portraits of their historical counterparts; these were neither as peaceful nor as warlike as they are portrayed.

The peaceful *détente* enjoyed during this period under Baldwin IV was less the result of a coalition of pacifists than a desire to rebuild and consolidate power between campaigns.<sup>211</sup> After Baldwin IV achieved a decisive victory over Saladin at the battle of Montgisard in 1177, the latter returned to Damascus where he remained to help control his tenuous alliances and because of the threat of the new construction of the templar fortress at Jacob's Ford. Furthermore, the conflict between the Ibelin family and Guy de Lusignan was not a struggle of hawks versus doves as it is in the film, but rather a multifaceted political jockeying for position amongst nobles seeking to marry into the failing royal line and, thus, control the Kingdom after Baldwin IV's death.<sup>212</sup> Bernard Hamilton argues that the poor estimation of Guy in William of Tyre's chronicle is based on this

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<sup>210</sup> Charlotte Edwardes, 'Ridley Scott's New Crusades Film 'Panders to Osama Bin Laden'', *Telegraph.co.uk*, 18 January 2004 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/1452000/Ridley-Scotts-new-Crusades-film-panders-to-Osama-bin-Laden.html>> [accessed 23 May 2010].

<sup>211</sup> Christopher Tyerman, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades* (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. 351-356.

<sup>212</sup> Tyerman, pp. 358-362.

grudge since William was politically allied to the Ibelin family. Since this film uses William's chronicle as one of its prime sources, this prejudice has been inherited wholesale.<sup>213</sup>

However, the historical representation in the film is not all bad. The depiction of material culture, costume, banners, weapons and armour, are excellent. The fight choreography, though still stylised, is a more accurate rendering of medieval martial arts and tactics than in most film. Furthermore, the fights seek to instil in the viewer a sense of the brutality of medieval warfare rather than romanticised pageantry or swashbuckling showmanship. The film even does a remarkable job of portraying some aspects of twelfth-century intellectual culture, like the German warrior's brief summary of the theological basis for trial by combat: 'I say he's innocent of the charge. If you say he's guilty, we'll fight, and God will decide the truth of it.' Some scenes are directly inspired by the Latin and Arabic chronicles, like the scene of Reynald's death at Saladin's hand.

However, Riley-Smith's comments went beyond criticism of anachronism and became political: 'It's Osama bin Laden's version of history. It will fuel the Islamic fundamentalists'.<sup>214</sup> Riley-Smith's claim seems politically inflammatory, equating contemporary popular Eastern crusade ideology with terrorist ideology. By attributing an 'Osama bin Laden' version of history to *Kingdom of Heaven*, Riley-Smith damns contemporary Middle Eastern popular interpretations of the Crusades, which tend to view them in a negative light, and the film by association. In addition to Middle Eastern popular interpretations, the crusades in Western society have also been re-cast in the light of post-imperial, post-colonial guilt. In 1996, Crusade guilt spurred thousands of evangelical Christians to undertake a ritualistic 'reconciliation walk' which retraced the footsteps of the First Crusade. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot describes the event, every Muslim and Jew encountered along the 'crusade path' was given a public apology for 'the crimes committed in the

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<sup>213</sup> An exploration of the political intricacies of the Kingdom of Jerusalem during the time in which this film is set is Bernard Hamilton, *The Leper King and His Heirs: Baldwin IV and the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>214</sup> Edwardes, p. 18.



name of Christ since the First Crusade'.<sup>215</sup> By taking on the culpability for the Crusades, these Christians claimed a moral, religious ancestry from those who took the cross in the twelfth century. This serves only to reinforce the idea that the Crusades were a series of abuses by the West, rather than the more balanced historian's view of the period as episodes in an intermittent intercultural feud. This constructs a 'self' and 'other' based upon lines projected onto the Crusades from a postcolonial position where the Europe of today is the same as the Europe of the twelfth century. They also reinforce the idea that the 'wounds' left by the crusades still exist as scars felt by modern Jews and Muslims for which the entire West should feel remorse. This is a dangerous notion, as it may be reversed to promote the idea that contemporary Jews and Muslims are culpable for the actions of their forebears. This could promote the familiar anti-Semitic argument that the Jews are responsible for the death of Jesus or any number of other spurious accusations.

### **The influence of orientalism**

The perceived culpability of the West for the Crusades is based on a conflation of two things: the West's self-reproach, and the contemporary Islamist polemicist's narrative of victimisation by the West. The narrative is part of the pervasive impact of orientalism on crusade ideology; however, its development is convoluted.<sup>216</sup> Instead of Western authors, politicians and religious figures dictating the idea of crusade (as was typically the case through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), the West is now interpolating Eastern rhetoric against crusade into its overarching sense of post-colonial, post-imperial guilt. Ironically, the anti-crusade rhetoric that was embraced by anti-imperialist Arab polemicists (and which is occasionally employed to this day) was originally popularised by Sir Walter Scott in his novel *The Talisman*. Sir Walter Scott's novel is a birthplace for the popular idea of the wicked crusader army victimising a noble, peaceful Muslim world.

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<sup>215</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, 'Abortive Rituals: Historical Apologies in the Global Era', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 2 (2000), 171-186 (p. 172).

<sup>216</sup> Christopher Tyerman, *Fighting for Christendom: Holy War and the Crusades* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 197-200.

Unsurprisingly, it is a major source for the way crusade is depicted in the four other films which depict the Third Crusade as its central action.<sup>217</sup>

The ideological power in this paradigm remains with the Westerner. Western apologists are entering into the same enterprise as their imperialist orientalist forefathers, making of the Middle East what they want, and using the Middle East as a form of self-definition. This is reflected in *Kingdom of Heaven's* treatment of the East. In the film, though noble, the Muslims only react to the atrocities of the Christians rather than acting independently and of their own accord. By structuring the narrative in this way, the filmmakers remove any politically incorrect implications that might equate Muslims with warmongers. However in so doing, they unintentionally retain remnants of the power structure of orientalism.<sup>218</sup>

It would be difficult for a production company concerned with public opinion to present a film to an audience in 2005 that was not based in this constructed ideology of crusader guilt. In the climate after the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, the US and its military responses in Iraq and Afghanistan came under international criticism. Thus any film that presented the crusades as noble could incite international public backlash. Similarly, any film which presented the Islamic point of view could incite backlash as well. As such, Riley-Smith's 'Osama bin Laden's version of history' treads the careful line needed to satisfy Western society in 2005. *Kingdom of Heaven* is structured around an allegory recognisable by an international audience that had witnessed conflict in the Middle East. The final title card reads, 'Nearly 1000 years later, peace in the Kingdom of Heaven remains elusive'. The point made in the closing of the film is that the crusade, the conflict is now as it was then, and will remain so unless we learn to be better.

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<sup>217</sup> The four films of which I am aware beside *Kingdom of Heaven* which depict the Crusades as their central action are: Cecil B. DeMille, *The Crusades* (Universal Studios, 1935); David Butler, *King Richard and the Crusaders* (Warner Brothers, 1954); Youssef Chahine, *El Naser Salah Ad-Din* (Lotus Films, 1963); Peter Flinth, *Arn: The Knight Templar* (Svensk Filmindustri, 2007).

<sup>218</sup> Much of my theoretical background for understanding the broadly defined 'East' and 'West', along with the historical power interplays between those two entities originates with Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003).

### **Construction of morality in the film**

One of the ways in which a film reflects the society in which it is produced is by its construction of morality. What is 'good' and 'evil' are often traceable to the morality of the filmmakers and/or the film's target audience. Epics like *Kingdom of Heaven* rely upon clearly defined morality and culminate in a violent clash between 'good' and 'evil'. *Kingdom of Heaven* problematises this trope by painting the medieval mindset itself as 'evil'. It condemns those who espouse typically medieval ideas about holy war and religion as evil, and equates them with those who wish to pursue contemporary religious war. The plot traces the decay of the uneasy truce between the Kingdom of Jerusalem and Saladin through the provocative actions of fanatical Christians. This structure is intended to resonate with many outsiders' views of the contemporary conflicts in Iraq and Israel: both involve two sides, one Western, one Middle Eastern. In each, lasting war, or lasting peace rests on the knife's edge and is, ultimately, subject to the whim of a select few powerful men. The crusaders and Muslims are feuding enemies who, like their modern counterparts, have been at odds with one another for so long, and who have exchanged so many blows and counter-blows that the original offence has become irrelevant. The voice of one weary of this is placed in Balian's mouth when he tells his garrison:

No Muslim of the great army now coming against us was born when this city was lost. We fight over the offence we did not give, against those who were not alive to be offended. What is Jerusalem? Your [the Christians'] holy places lie over the Jewish temple that the Romans pulled down. The Muslim places of worship lie over yours. Which is more holy? ...who has claim? No one has claim. All have claim!

The allegory of the Crusades as a modern Middle Eastern conflict is also reflected in the depiction of the siege of Jerusalem. After the wall of Jerusalem is breached by Saladin's trebuchets, warriors from both sides pour into the breach, slaughtering each other in slow-motion, with a layer of blood covering everything. The scene then cuts abruptly to an overhead shot, showing the mountains of soldiers, packed tightly and pressing against their enemy with no progress or advantage possible. This image slowly pans upward as the bloody stalemate grinds on. After a few seconds, the image dissolves into the same shot, after the battle. Instead of massed men pushing

against and killing each other over a small piece of property, it shows the result: only broken corpses remain, littering the blood-soaked field where men once stood. Nothing has been gained by either side. This visual image is a striking metaphor for the conflict over Israel, which some regard as an unending struggle over a small piece of land with seemingly little progress except for a growing body count.

### **Innocent victims vs. Templar terrorism**

Another of the central moral themes of *Kingdom of Heaven* is articulated by 'the Hospitaller', who 'serves as [the film's] spiritual guide':<sup>219</sup> 'Holiness is in right action, and courage on behalf of those who cannot defend themselves, and goodness'. From this speech onward, *Kingdom of Heaven* adopts an anachronistic humanitarian anxiety over the effects of conflict on civilian populations. Even the knight's oath that Balian takes (and later, administers) concludes with, 'Safeguard the helpless, and do no wrong'.<sup>220</sup> Pairing the concept of humanitarianism and right action sets the moral framework; each self-sacrificial action that the protagonists undertake is done to, as Godfrey commands at his death, 'protect the people'. Balian throws himself headlong into a cavalry battle which he knows is suicidal because if he were to retreat 'these people [the peasants fleeing the Muslim cavalry] will die'. Later, when Balian defends the city of Jerusalem against impossible odds, his reason is 'not to protect these stones, but the people living within these walls'. Saladin's nobility is shown through his humanitarianism; he offers to spare the lives of everyone in the city of Jerusalem upon its surrender. Balian is shocked at his generosity, saying, 'The Christians butchered every Muslim within the walls when they took this city', to which Saladin only replies, 'I am not those men'.<sup>221</sup> He even spares the life of his enemy, Guy de

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<sup>219</sup> Bob Thompson, 'Hollywood on Crusade', *The Washington Post*, 1 May 2005, p. N01  
<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/04/29/AR2005042900744.html>> [accessed 23 May 2010].

<sup>220</sup> Ridley Scott's interest in chivalric values and knighthood in this film are possibly a result of this being the first he directed after being knighted. 'Queen Knights Gladiator Director', *BBC News Online*  
<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/film/3054254.stm>> [accessed 10 Nov. 2006]

<sup>221</sup> This exchange refers to the massacre of Jerusalem in 1099, when the crusaders killed a large number of civilians inside the city after capturing it. Here, Saladin shows the audience, seemingly, the only way to

Lusignan. Humanitarianism as the highest form of chivalric virtue is a modern construct, not a medieval one. Ravaging the countryside (known as *chevauchée*) was an intrinsic part of much medieval warfare as a means of demoralising an enemy and re-supplying an army, and often involved wholesale slaughter.<sup>222</sup>

Conversely, in *Kingdom of Heaven* the highest form of villainy is killing civilians to achieve political goals. Guy de Lusignan, Reynald de Châtillon and their Templar followers raid Muslim civilian caravans for no apparent reason other than to incite war. Upon becoming king, Guy murders a Saracen messenger in front of his court. When Saladin's army assaults the city, the character known as 'the Mullah' whips the soldiers into a frenzy by calling for revenge for the slaughter of 1099, saying: 'God has sent you this day! You will take no prisoners; as they did, so shall it be done!' This focus on civilians is a metaphor intended to resonate with an audience horrified by modern civilian crises in Sudan, Palestine, and Somalia or the victims of terrorism in Israel, Madrid and the US. The most recent and striking for the UK public of 2005 was the 2003 War in Iraq; by the end of 2005 the civilian casualties numbered between 27,115 and 30,559.<sup>223</sup> The intense media coverage of these events suggests that an audience in 2005 may have been particularly sensitive to the plight of civilians during armed conflict.

### **The Crusades and the United States**

In the film the Crusades are given a context specifically recognisable by an American audience.

Jerusalem is recast as a medieval America-type, as Godfrey calls it:

A new world. A man who in France had not a house is, in the Holy Land, the master of a city. He who was the master of a city begs in the gutter. There, at the end of the world, you are not what you are born but what you have it in yourself to be. A kingdom of

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break the endless cycle of violence and reprisals: he chooses to show mercy upon his enemies even when he has the advantage and cause for revenge.

<sup>222</sup> For an overview of the tactics and realities of medieval warfare, see Helen Nicholson, *Medieval Warfare: Theory and Practice of War in Europe, 300-1500* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), or for tactics used specifically during the crusades, see John France, *Western Warfare in the Age of the Crusades, 1000-1300* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>223</sup> Hamit Dardagan and John Sloboda, 'Iraq Body Count | DATABASE | Latest Updates', *Iraq Body Count Database*, 2005 <<http://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/>> [accessed 23 May 2010].

conscience, peace instead of war, love instead of hate: that is what lies at the end of crusade.

The Jerusalem of *Kingdom of Heaven* is the land-of-opportunity fantasy of America: a vibrant, thriving melting pot of ethnicities and religions, a bastion of cooperation, prosperity and integration. This ideological image can be read as an attempt to relate history to its American audience. The metaphor is pushed further when the fantasy of peace and unity is destroyed by fanaticism. This narrative of division furthers the allegory of the conflict within America and the relationship between America and the Muslim world after September 11<sup>th</sup>. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, President George W. Bush's rhetoric began to reflect a polarised, religiously-inspired worldview made up of moral binaries which would influence his foreign policy in coming years. America became the ultimate symbol of good, 'the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world',<sup>224</sup> and its mission became to 'rid the world of evil doers'.<sup>225</sup> This evoked religious imagery both of America as the New Jerusalem of the Book of Revelation and a new international purpose for Americans as God's warriors: 'Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them... we'll meet violence with patient justice – assured of the rightness of our cause, and confident of the victories to come', and that 'This is our calling. This is our Nation's time to lead the world... to root out evil'.<sup>226</sup> Bush's rhetoric strove to unite the United States and its allies by creating a 'self' versus 'other' binary, and included statements such as 'Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists', and 'We don't care how you help. Either you're for us, or you're against us'.<sup>227</sup> Otilia Veronica Gaidos argues that these rhetorical tactics are 'dangerously parallel to that used by Muslim and other orthodox extremists

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<sup>224</sup> George W. Bush, 'Statement by the President in His Address to the Nation', *The White House, President George W. Bush*, 2001 <<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-16.html>> [accessed 23 May 2010].

<sup>225</sup> President George W. Bush, 'Remarks by the President Upon Arrival: The South Lawn, Sept. 16, 2001', *White House Online* <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html>> [accessed 22 November 2006]

<sup>226</sup> George W. Bush, 'President Unveils Back to Work Plan: Department of Labour', *The White House, President George W. Bush*, 2001 <<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011004-8.html>> [accessed 23 May 2010].

<sup>227</sup> Bush, 'President Unveils Back to Work Plan'.

to justify acts of terrorism'.<sup>228</sup> The leadership of al-Qaeda has also used these discourses of 'othering', divine purpose, and binary oppositions to enflame passions amongst its own followers: 'To kill the Americans and their allies – civilians and military – is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it... This is in accordance with the words of Almighty God'.<sup>229</sup>

*Kingdom of Heaven* can be read as critical of these tactics. Bush and bin Laden's rhetoric are given a twelfth century voice in Guy de Lusignan, the film's antagonist, when he says, 'When the king is dead, Jerusalem will be no place for friends of Muslims or traitors to Christendom', and 'Tiberias knows more than a Christian should about Saladin's intentions'. Like Bush and bin Laden, de Lusignan identifies tolerance with sedition and defines those who do not want open war as siding with the enemy.

In *Kingdom of Heaven*, the binary of good and evil is defined across the West/East line, where each side is similarly structured with a noble leader (Saladin or Baldwin IV) at its head who works with the virtuous characters under them to control the fanatics. The most virtuous characters are therefore those who are either victims unwillingly caught between the two sides, or members of an enlightened pacifistic elite of humanist, universalist leaders who struggle to keep the fanatics underneath them at bay. The conflict of good and evil is not between Christian and Muslim, but between those on both sides who press for holy war and those who struggle for peace.

### **Taking Christ out of crusade**

One of the strangest elements of *Kingdom of Heaven* is how secular it depicts the Crusades to have been; it extends the allegory of 'humanism as superior to religious zeal' even to its depiction of medieval religion. One of the Hospitaller's lines is central to the film's estimation of religion: 'I

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<sup>228</sup> Otilia Veronica Gaidos, 'A Faith-Based Administration', *The Humanist*, 62, 40-42 (p. 41)..

<sup>229</sup> Osama bin Laden, 'Text of Fatwa Urging Jihad Against Americans', *Al-Quds Al-'Arabi*, 23 February 1998, p. 3 (p. 3).

put no stock in religion. By the word “religion” I have seen the lunacy of fanatics of every denomination be called the will of God’. *Kingdom of Heaven* is not only deeply critical of the Crusades from a pacifist perspective, but also from one deeply critical of fundamentalist religion. Ridley Scott admitted that the parallel was intentional, saying the Templars ‘are what you might call the right-wing or Christian fundamentalists of their day’, and that the film ‘challenges extremism of all kinds’.<sup>230</sup>

All characters who are representatives of official religion, whether Christian or Muslim, are warmongering antagonists. Many embody the worst stereotypes of the zealous (mad, hypocritical, or rabidly ignorant): those who claim to know God’s will embody it the least. Every time the will of God is evoked by a character in the film, it is in an untrustworthy way. The medieval crusader cry of ‘God Wills It!’ is heard from both Muslims and Christians, to encourage acts which the audience would understand to be against the moral compass of the film: murder, terrorism and war.<sup>231</sup> The wild-eyed crusade priest on the road to Messina who repeats *ad nauseam* ‘To kill an infidel is not murder, it is the path to heaven!’ seems less a faithful representative of the Church than a ranting proselytiser; he attracts discomfort from his audience as well as the passing crusaders. The avaricious, cowardly Patriarch of Jerusalem is emblematic of a modern interpretation of the opulent medieval church; he can also be read as an allegory for wealthy fundamentalist televangelists like Pat Robertson and Jim Bakker. The Patriarch begs Balian to leave the people of Jerusalem to die: ‘It is unfortunate about the people, but it is God’s will’. He later shows his willingness to abandon Christianity in order to save himself, instructing Balian to ‘Convert to Islam. Repent later’. Balian replies, ‘You’ve taught me a lot about religion, Your Eminence’. The film also depicts medieval religious practice as barbaric and backward. The patriarch demands that Balian should not burn the bodies of the dead defenders of Jerusalem

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<sup>230</sup> Charlotte O’Sullivan, ‘Hollywood’s Holy War’, *The Evening Standard*, 28 April 2005, p. A04.

<sup>231</sup> ‘God Wills It!’ is was a common crusader battle cry based upon the Latin ‘Deus Vult’, which Robert the Monk records Pope Urban II as having said during his speech at Clermont. See Robert the Monk, *Robert the Monk’s History of the First Crusade: Historia Iherosolimitana*, trans. by Carol Sweetenham, Crusade Texts in Translation, 11 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 61.



because 'a body that is burned cannot be resurrected until Judgement day'.<sup>232</sup> Balian, ever forward-thinking, insists, 'If we do not burn these bodies we will all be dead in three days' and 'God will understand. If he does not, then he is not God, and we needn't worry'. As well, in the opening scene the audience is shown a burial at a crossroads as crusaders ride by. At the end of the scene, the priest tells the diggers: 'She was a suicide. Cut off her head... and return the axe'. These scenes highlight the differences between medieval and modern religion, and portray medieval religion as clinging to superstitions that modern society has since abandoned. This could be interpreted as the filmmakers gesturing at the superstitious quality of all religion, whether modern or medieval.

## Conclusion

Like many historical films, *Kingdom of Heaven* attempts to make history relevant to a modern audience. Ironically, it does so by distancing the audience from the medieval past, and condemning those who espouse medieval values (both then and now). The characters that represent the 'norm' of medieval society, whether by their adherence to their religion or their desire to carry out religious war are cast as villains. Those who adhere to modern liberal ideals of integration, pacifism and freedom are viewed as heroes. This asks viewers of the film to engage with their medieval forebears in a similar way: to regard those who adhere to medieval morals and standards with scorn rather than engaging with them as normal members of the society in which they lived.<sup>233</sup>

It is possible that a member of the public, having seen *Kingdom of Heaven*, will leave a theatre with a better understanding of medieval culture and history than when they sat down.

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<sup>232</sup> This was an early eleventh century belief. See Michael Frassetto, 'Resurrection of the Body: Eleventh-Century Evidence from the Sermons of Ademar of Chabannes', *Journal of Religious History*, 26 (2002), 235-249 (p. 241).

<sup>233</sup> This groups *Kingdom of Heaven* with a larger corpus of films that treat medieval people as inferior based either on their morality, religion or technology, including *Timeline*, *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc*, and most of the movies which employ the basic structure of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, like *Black Knight* and, to a lesser degree, *Time Bandits*. Donner, *Timeline*; Luc Besson, *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* (Sony Pictures, 1999); Junger, *Black Knight*; Gilliam, *Time Bandits*.

There are many laudable aspects of the film: exquisite visual metaphors, excellent cinematography and stunningly rendered aspects of medieval culture. However, the audience is shown something more than a history lesson. At the core of the film lies an allegory which equates the medieval mindset with contemporary religious extremism. The filmmakers posit that as a people we have, or at least we should have, progressed beyond the Middle Ages. However, the question remains: do audiences read this film in this way?

### ***The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King***

The popularity and public impact of *The Lord of the Rings* novels and their recent film adaptations are well known. In 2003, over 750,000 Britons were surveyed by the BBC as part of its 'The Big Read' programme in order to find 'The Nation's Best-Loved Book'. *The Lord of the Rings* came first, as it also did in subsequent similar surveys conducted in Germany and Australia.<sup>234</sup> Published in three parts from 1954-1955, the books have been translated into over forty languages and have sold over a hundred million copies.<sup>235</sup> Though the novel was popular at the time of its release, during the 1960s and 1970s its popularity ballooned as it was taken on by the hippie counterculture due in part to its naturalist and anti-industrialist themes. It has remained so ever since, and has also spawned an entire genre of derivative medievalist fantasy literature. The trilogy of films directed by Peter Jackson and released between 2001 and 2003 has achieved a similar popularity, collectively grossing nearly three billion dollars at the box office worldwide.<sup>236</sup> The *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy has also met with critical accolades, having been nominated for thirty academy awards and winning seventeen (its final instalment tying with *Ben Hur* and *Titanic* for the most awards won to date). Film review aggregator website 'Rotten Tomatoes' reports that of the over two hundred reviews published for each film, 92% of those for *Fellowship of the Ring*

<sup>234</sup> 'BBC: The Big Read' <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/bigread/>> [accessed 27 April 2010].

<sup>235</sup> *Tolkien the Medievalist*, ed. by Jane Chance (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 1.

<sup>236</sup> Figure retrieved from <http://boxofficemojo.com/>. As a result of these box office figures, the three Lord of the Rings films would thus be the three highest-grossing medieval films of the past decade and thus dominate this study. However for the purposes of diversity, this thesis will only examine the final instalment *Return of the King*, and to regard two other non-*Lord of the Rings* films as well.

were positive, 96% of those for *The Two Towers* were positive and 94% of those for *Return of the King* were positive.<sup>237</sup>

This thesis only includes focuses upon the third film instalment, *The Return of the King*. The action begins with the heroes split into two groups. Heroic hobbits Frodo and Sam are being led by the treacherous Gollum into the black land of Mordor where they intend to destroy the magic ring which empowers the Dark Lord Sauron. Meanwhile, Aragorn (the king of Gondor *in absentia*) along with his companions, the wizard Gandalf, elf Legolas, dwarf Gimli and hobbits Merry and Pippin, work with King Theoden of the neighbouring kingdom of Rohan to ride to Gondor's aid. Gandalf and Pippin ride on ahead, and find Gondor's capital city Minas Tirith reeling under the weight of bad rulership by the steward, Denethor, and an impending invasion. The forces of Mordor invade Gondor and lay siege to Minas Tirith, which is only able to resist annihilation due to Gandalf's leadership. The King of Rohan (and his cavalrymen, known as the Rohirrim) arrive at the gates of Gondor and, with the help of Aragorn and his companions, drive back the invading forces of Mordor. The heroes gather their meagre remaining strength and launch a suicidal assault on the gates of Mordor in order to give Sam and Frodo the opportunity to sneak into Mordor undetected and destroy the ring. Sam and Frodo are successful, and are saved from death in the ensuing cataclysm by Gandalf and a group of giant eagles. The world is saved, Sauron and the forces of Mordor are defeated completely, Aragorn is made King, and the hobbits return to their homes.

Unlike the source material for the other two films that form the basis of this study, *The Lord of the Rings* is not self-evidently medieval; it is neither medieval history nor medieval literature. It is also not contemporary historical fiction; the world that the novel depicts is not our world or our history and was created solely by the imagination of the author. So, though popular,

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<sup>237</sup> 'The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring', *Rotten Tomatoes* <[http://uk.rottentomatoes.com/m/lord\\_of\\_the\\_rings\\_the\\_fellowship\\_of\\_the\\_ring/](http://uk.rottentomatoes.com/m/lord_of_the_rings_the_fellowship_of_the_ring/)> [accessed 5 May 2010]; 'The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers', *Rotten Tomatoes* <[http://uk.rottentomatoes.com/m/lord\\_of\\_the\\_rings\\_the\\_two\\_towers/](http://uk.rottentomatoes.com/m/lord_of_the_rings_the_two_towers/)> [accessed 5 May 2010]; 'The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King', *Rotten Tomatoes* <[http://uk.rottentomatoes.com/m/lord\\_of\\_the\\_rings\\_the\\_return\\_of\\_the\\_king/](http://uk.rottentomatoes.com/m/lord_of_the_rings_the_return_of_the_king/)> [accessed 5 May 2010].

how can *The Lord of the Rings* be considered a valid topic in a study, such as this one, which explores public understandings of the *medieval* world?

Though *The Lord of the Rings* was neither created during nor depicts the Middle Ages, it is a work of fantasy created by an author who used the stories, languages, mythologies and material cultures of the Middle Ages in order to craft his fantastical world. While the author J. R. R. Tolkien, himself a professor of medieval languages, drew upon many cultural traditions as sources, his medievalism predominates. As a result, his Middle-earth (the name itself derived from an Anglo-Saxon term for the world of man) is a funhouse mirror version of the Middle Ages, at once both familiar and foreign. This section will survey the scholarship which has explored how Tolkien drew upon medieval sources for his novels. Further, it will examine the degree to which the film adaptations can be considered medieval, with special attention paid to the degree to which the filmmakers intended to create a fantasy world based in real history.

#### **How can the *The Lord of the Rings* novels be considered ‘medieval’?**

His medieval roots are plain to see – from the surface texture of costume, custom, battle-gear and speech to the deeper borrowings of theme and pattern from *Beowulf*, Malory and the *Gawain* poet.<sup>238</sup>

Verlyn Fleiger

As for the rest of the tale it is [...] derived from (previously digested) epic, mythology, and fairy-story – not, however, Victorian in authorship, as a rule to which George Macdonald is the chief exception.<sup>239</sup>

J.R.R. Tolkien

Tolkien himself did not approve of the academic search for ‘sources’. He thought it tended to distract attention from the work of art itself, and to undervalue the artist by the suggestion that he had ‘got it all’ from somewhere else.<sup>240</sup>

Tom Shippey

<sup>238</sup> Verlyn Fleiger, ‘Tolkien’s Wild Men: From Medieval to Modern’, in *Tolkien the Medievalist*, ed. by Jane Chance (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 95-105 (p. 95).

<sup>239</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. by Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 31.

<sup>240</sup> T. A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle-Earth* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982), p. 220.

Tolkien's writings, both academic and popular, have since the late 1970s spawned their own academic field of study; therefore, a lengthy analysis of the *The Lord of the Rings* novels searching for their medieval sources and resonances is unnecessary for this thesis since there is already a corpus of scholarship dedicated to this question. To provide a picture of Tolkien's medieval influences, the following section surveys the major works in this field.

J. R. R. Tolkien was a professional philologist and scholar of Germanic languages, particularly of Old English. It was his interest in languages which inspired him academically and is generally thought to be one of the *raisons d'être* for his imaginative literature. He invented languages as a hobby, and wrote thus concerning his creative process: 'The invention of languages is the foundation. The "stories" were made rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse. To me a name comes first and the story follows'.<sup>241</sup> In his academic career, he was a lecturer in English at the University of Leeds and later a professor at the University of Oxford. Academically he is best known for his work on the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for his *A Middle English Vocabulary*, his translated editions of Middle English poems *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Sir Orfeo* and *Pearl* and his groundbreaking (if rare) academic publications: 'On Fairy Stories' and 'Beowulf: The monsters and the critics'.<sup>242</sup> Tolkien wrote fiction on the side, publishing *The Hobbit* in 1937 and its sequel *The Lord of the Rings* in three parts between 1954 and 1955. In addition, he wrote an entire history, mythology and legendarium of his invented world which was not published until after his death. These works include *The Silmarillion* and the twelve-volume *The History of Middle Earth*.<sup>243</sup>

Academic interest in Tolkien's work began in the late 1970s. From the 1970s and 1980s there exist two monographs which focus on Tolkien as a medievalist. Published first in 1978, Jane Chance's *Tolkien's Art: A 'Mythology for England'* is primarily interested in providing literary

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<sup>241</sup> Tolkien, *Letters*, p. 219.

<sup>242</sup> Tolkien, pp. 14-44; J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1975); J. R. R. Tolkien, *A Middle English Vocabulary* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1922); Anonymous, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo*, ed. by Christopher Tolkien, trans. by J. R. R. Tolkien (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1979).

<sup>243</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, ed. by Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 1976); J. R. R. Tolkien, *The History of Middle Earth*, ed. by Christopher Tolkien, 12 vols (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983-1995).

analysis. However, in chapter five: *'The Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's Epic'*, Chance briefly sketches the relationship between *The Lord of the Rings*, Germanic epics such as *Beowulf* and the *Nibelungenlied* and the genre of medieval romance, especially in Tolkien's frequent use of the trope of the 'Germanic Lord'.<sup>244</sup> Tom Shippey's *The Road to Middle-Earth* is more linguistic in its approach, and focuses upon Tolkien's use of medieval words and languages in his work. Its first appendix, 'Tolkien's Sources: The true tradition' is, as its title would imply, the most useful for the exploration of Tolkien's medieval sources. Importantly, Shippey distinguishes between Tolkien's authentically medieval sources and the similarities Tolkien's work shares with other works of medievalism. Shippey argues that while Tolkien's work may bear resemblances to other works of medievalism, he did not necessarily use these (at least consciously) as sources. For example, though *Lord of the Rings* has many of the same motifs as Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, '...what upset Tolkien was the fact that Wagner was working, at second-hand, from material which he [Tolkien] knew at first-hand, primarily the heroic poems of the *Elder Edda* and the later Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*'.<sup>245</sup> Shippey also notes that Tolkien denied using as sources '... Shakespeare, Spenser, George MacDonald, Hans Christian Andersen. All, he thought, had got something very important not quite right'.<sup>246</sup> Shippey therefore sees Tolkien's work not as evolutionary or derivative, but as an attempt to tell a new tale drawing from authentically medieval sources.

Shippey names several sources for Tolkien's work, including *Beowulf* (which Tolkien called 'among my most valued sources'<sup>247</sup>), other Old English poems including 'The Ruin', 'The Wanderer' and 'The Battle of Maldon'<sup>248</sup> and a collection of twenty-nine Old Norse poems that comprise the *Poetic Edda* (a major linguistic source). Shippey names other 'clear medieval English influences on Tolkien' such as *Mandeville's Travels* and the romantic Breton *Lais* of Marie de France, as well as

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<sup>244</sup> Jane Chance, 'The Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's Epic', in *Tolkien's Art: A Mythology for England*, Rev. ed (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), pp. 141-182.

<sup>245</sup> Shippey, *The Road to Middle-Earth*, p. 220.

<sup>246</sup> Shippey, *The Road to Middle-Earth*, p. 220.

<sup>247</sup> Tolkien, *Letters*, p. 31.

<sup>248</sup> Tolkien, *Letters*, p. 221.

the Middle English poems *Pearl*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Sir Orfeo* (the latter three of which Tolkien published editions with E.V. Gordon in the 1920s, and translations into modern English posthumously in 1979).<sup>249</sup> Tolkien's non-English medieval sources are named as the Finnish epic *Kalevala*, and the German romance tradition.<sup>250</sup> Shippey also makes note of the idea, which has been echoed many times before and since, that in writing his fiction Tolkien was attempting to fabricate a 'mythology for England' with the Anglo-Saxons as the cultural and linguistic point of origin. Tolkien felt this necessary because of:

...the poverty of my own beloved country: it had no stories of its own (bound up with its tongue and soil), nor the quality that I sought, and found (as an ingredient) in legends of other lands. There was Greek, and Celtic, and Romance, Germanic, Scandinavian and Finnish (which greatly affected me); but nothing English, save impoverished chap-book stuff.<sup>251</sup>

Chance has taken a different position to Shippey, arguing that Tolkien does owe a debt to other medievalists in addition to the medieval sources.

Tolkien from the beginning responded to his modern contexts by retelling his medieval sources and adapting his medieval scholarship to his own voice. Tolkien was, over time, influenced by his own personal medievalism, his profession as a medievalist, his relationship with other medievalists, and his own mythologizing in constructing his major fiction.<sup>252</sup>

Subsequent works on Tolkien's sources have largely drawn the same parallels as Chance and Shippey, but in more detail. Between 1982 and 2000, academic work on Tolkien was relatively sparse, but the interest generated by the Peter Jackson films instigated a renaissance. Chance wrote in 2003 that 'the implications of Tolkien's medievalness has [*sic*] only been touched upon',

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<sup>249</sup> Shippey, *The Road to Middle-Earth*, p. 224; *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967); Anonymous, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo*, trans. by J. R. R. Tolkien (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1979).

<sup>250</sup> Shippey, *The Road to Middle-Earth*, p. 224.

<sup>251</sup> Tolkien, *Letters*, p. 144.

<sup>252</sup> Chance, *Tolkien the Medievalist*, p. 4.

but this is no longer the case.<sup>253</sup> Multiple monographs and collections have been published and in 2004, a journal entitled *Tolkien Studies* was inaugurated.<sup>254</sup>

*Tolkien and the invention of myth: A reader* focuses upon the linguistic provenances of Tolkien's world. Parts III, IV and V (pp. 81-304) focus on Tolkien's use of medieval languages: Old Norse, Old English and Finnish respectively, in the creation of his world.<sup>255</sup> *Tolkien the Medievalist* has four chapters which explore his work's medievalness. In these, Verlyn Elieger traces how Tolkien uses the archetype of the Wild Man from medieval romance, but updates it, making it 'a figure who shows us something of ourselves, something essential, pitiable, and typical of the human condition.'<sup>256</sup> Next, Leslie Donovan shows how Tolkien's few female characters are patterned on the valkyrie tradition of Old Norse mythology.<sup>257</sup> Following this, Miranda Wilcox explores the exile narrative of the Elves, and specifically compares the Elvish songs Tolkien included in *Lord of the Rings* with Anglo-Saxon exile poetry *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. Finally, Margaret A. Sinex draws useful parallels between Tolkien's description of the army of the dead in *Return of the King* with descriptions of a similar army of the riding dead in twelfth-century tales of Hellequin's Hunt by Orderic Vitalis.<sup>258</sup>

*The Keys of Middle-earth: Discovering Medieval Culture through the Fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien* presents translated facing-page editions of medieval texts to which Tolkien's novels bear resemblance.<sup>259</sup> In this text, Lee and Sulopova argue that 'Readers might naturally assume, therefore, that the texts in some way should be looked on as sources for the episodes set in

<sup>253</sup> Chance, *Tolkien the Medievalist*, p. 3.

<sup>254</sup> Of these, the most useful for examining Tolkien's medieval resonances are: a collection edited by George Clark and Daniel Timmons in 2000 entitled *J.R.R. Tolkien and his literary resonances*, two edited by Chance in 2003 and 2004 entitled *Tolkien the Medievalist* and *Tolkien and the invention of myth: A reader*, a source book by Stuart Lee and Elizabeth Solopova entitled *The Keys of Middle-Earth: Discovering Medieval Literature through the Fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien*, and a 2005 collection edited by Chance and Alfred Siewers entitled *Tolkien's Modern Middle Ages*.

<sup>255</sup> Jane Chance, *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), pp. 81-304.

<sup>256</sup> Chance, *Tolkien the Medievalist*, p. 105.

<sup>257</sup> Chance, *Tolkien the Medievalist*, p. 128. Here, Donovan is quoting Robert Boenig, 'Tolkien and Old Germanic Ethics', *Mythlore*, 13 (1986), 9-12.

<sup>258</sup> For more on Hellequin's hunt, see: Amanda Jane Hingst, *The Written World: Past and Place in the Work of Orderic Vitalis* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), pp. 92-109.

<sup>259</sup> Stuart D. Lee and Elizabeth Solopova, *The Keys of Middle-Earth: Discovering Medieval Literature Through the Fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 3.



Middle-earth, that is, that Tolkien used material from them in his own fiction'.<sup>260</sup> They then go on to rebut this claim, asserting that the book 'is aimed at unlocking that world [of medieval literature] he [Tolkien] studied, taught, wrote about and greatly admired. '<sup>261</sup> In spite of this, *The Keys of Middle-earth* is a useful and thorough examination of medieval literature which Tolkien may not necessarily have consciously used for material, but which would certainly have influenced his storytelling.

Finally, *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits* is important due to a chapter that discusses the rarely explored question of the material cultures of Tolkien's world. In it, Dimitria Fimi traces Tolkien's few descriptions of material culture to medieval and nineteenth-century visions of the Vikings and Anglo-Saxon art and artefacts.<sup>262</sup> The description of material culture is one of the most useful elements of a book during the process of adaptation for film as it provides the imagery essential for a visual medium. Though Tolkien was meticulous in his description of place, chronology and mythology, he only rarely addresses material culture such as what is worn or used, or how the built environments look in his world. Tolkien himself saw this as a missing element in his writing style; when a fan wrote to Tolkien in a letter asking 'What clothes did the peoples of Middle-earth wear?' Tolkien replied: 'I do not know the detail of clothing. I visualise with great clarity and detail scenery and "natural" objects, but not artefacts'. However, Tolkien offers some clues:

Pauline Baynes drew her inspiration for *F. Giles* [*Farmer Giles of Ham*, a medieval fantasy written by Tolkien in 1939 and illustrated by Baynes] largely from mediaeval MS. drawings – except for the knights (who are a bit 'King-Arthurish')\* the style seems to fit well enough.<sup>263</sup>

At the asterisk, Tolkien supplies a footnote which reads:

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<sup>260</sup> Stuart D. Lee and Solopova, p. 3.

<sup>261</sup> Stuart D. Lee and Solopova, pp. 3-4.

<sup>262</sup> Dimitria Fimi, *Tolkien, Race, and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>263</sup> Tolkien, *Letters*, p. 280.

Sc. [namely] belong to our “mythological” Middle-Ages which blends unhistorically styles and details ranging over 500 years, and most of which did not of course exist in the Dark Ages of c. 500 A.D.<sup>264</sup>

Perhaps without realising, Tolkien has here described his own writing. Tolkien himself created a new version of the ‘mythological Middle-Ages’, blending disparate cultures and times to create something which, though new, is rooted in the medieval past. As a result, though his work is fantasy, it bears a traceable resemblance to this amalgamated Middle Ages in its language, themes, tropes, characters and material cultures. It is hardly surprising, then, that a film made of Tolkien’s work, which attempted to remain faithful to the original, retains much of this amalgamated-medieval style.

#### **To what degree do the films seem ‘medieval’?**

[Fantasy is] more interesting if you treat it as historical. That’s one of the things we did with *Lord of the Rings*: We wanted [Middle-earth] to feel like a real place. And for the movie to feel like a genuinely historic occasion. We based the design on the principle that it's a historical event. Nothing too fantastical. I wanted it to be dirty and grungy. Plus, it was based on cultures that existed, with elements of art nouveau and Scandinavian design. Hobbiton was pre-Victorian England. We went to real history to get our sources.<sup>265</sup>

Peter Jackson

One of the notable features of the *The Lord of the Rings* films is that they were designed to match Tolkien’s intention of creating an alternate history with fantastical elements rather than a fantasy. In doing so, the designers called upon a wide variety of historical sources in order to create the many locations and cultures of Middle-earth.

Though this gives them a recognisably historical aesthetic, like their literary forebears, the design of these films is the hybrid product of a number of historical and cultural sources. Some are recognisably medieval, while others are not. The story of the films begins in the Shire, which was designed to resemble an idyllic version of a nineteenth-century rural English village. After the

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<sup>264</sup> Tolkien, *Letters*, p. 280.

<sup>265</sup> Annalee Newitz, ‘Peter Jackson Spills All About The Hobbit, The Lovely Bones, and World War I Airplanes’, *io9*, 2009 <<http://io9.com/5321837/peter-jackson-spills-all-about-the-hobbit-the-lovely-bones-and-world-war-i-airplanes>> [accessed 6 September 2010].

hobbits make their way out of the shire, the world appears to shift from Victorian pastoral idyll to an alien space of pre-modernity. As the characters travel through space, they also travel back in time. This was an overall aesthetic goal of the design team. Paul Lasiane, Visual Effects Art Director for the trilogy said:

One of the ideas that we went with [...] was that the story is really like a journey back in time for Frodo and Sam. You look at the Shire, certainly Bag End, and it's almost like an old English farmhouse from the late 1800s [...] So you look at that and think England, maybe 150 years ago. It's pretty easy to place it. And as they go on their journey, every step they take, every new location they come to, is like going back in time a bit further. Aragorn is right out of King Arthur, as is Boromir, which puts you back in the twelfth century. Then they meet the Orcs, much further back, Medieval, Bronze Age, Iron Age stuff.<sup>266</sup>

The first foreign city encountered on their trip back in time is Bree. Bree is comprised of half-timbered houses and unpaved streets which give the city a late-medieval or early-Tudor aesthetic. However, the buildings are constructed at slightly odd angles to give an expressionistic mode to the scene, the environment reflecting the Hobbits' perception of the city as foreign and strange. Alan Lee recounts the buildings' aesthetic thus: 'The warped, half-timbered houses were constructed on top of the buildings that were already there, and you could step out of the muddy streets, through a medieval doorway, and into offices and barracks'.<sup>267</sup>

The cities and environments of Rohan were also intended to be recognisably medieval as well, based upon the culture of the Anglo-Saxons. Alan Lee recalls 'The buildings of Rohan are wooden and based loosely on our idea of structures that would have existed in northern Europe during the Dark Ages. The description of Hrothgar's Hall, Heorot, in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* was probably as useful as Tolkien's own words in evoking the kind of place we wanted to create'.<sup>268</sup> In a different interview, Lee reinforced this connection: 'When Tolkien described Meduseld, I'm sure he was thinking of Heorot, the "horn-gabled" feast hall of Hrothgar, king of the Geats [sic], in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*. I had done a painting of this for an earlier book,

<sup>266</sup> Gary Russell, *The Art of The Fellowship of the Ring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), p. 14.

<sup>267</sup> Alan Lee, *The Lord of the Rings Sketchbook* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), p. 34.

<sup>268</sup> Gary Russell, *The Art of The Lord of the Rings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), p. 85.

*Castles*, and that became a starting point for the designs of the Golden Hall'.<sup>269</sup> John Howe echoed this assessment: 'The Rohirrim are basically Anglo-Saxons with horses (Tolkien's contribution to alternative history, which would have certainly resulted in a different outcome at Hastings)'.<sup>270</sup>

The filmmakers claim to have based their depiction of Gondor on an amalgam of cultures, including Egyptian, Roman and the late-Antique/early-Medieval culture of Byzantium. This corresponds to Tolkien's description that, 'The Númenóreans of Gondor were proud, peculiar, and archaic, and I think are best pictured in (say) Egyptian terms'.<sup>271</sup> Ngila Dickson, head costume designer, said of the Gondorians that they were 'described as the most ancient of civilizations, the Tolkien equivalent of Rome, Egypt or Byzantium. So the design motif reflects a little of these lost worlds, perhaps more towards Byzantium than the others'.<sup>272</sup> Armour designer Warren Mahy wrote, 'We went through a lot of history when designing the main Gondorian armour. We used Greeks, Romans, even Hippolyte and they developed from there'.<sup>273</sup> With that being said, the final design of the Gondorian armour, a decorated solid breastplate with affixed pauldrons and tassets and reinforced with maille, is actually closer to chivalric armour of the late-medieval period than to any of these earlier civilisations.

The architecture of Gondor was also designed to evoke images of Roman or Byzantine civilisation. Jeremy Bennett, visual effects art director for the series, said that this period was chosen specifically to convey a message, 'I felt that Minas Tirith had a Romanesque flavour - I think that's what influenced Alan when he designed the environment. At this point in its history it's quite a run-down place. You could imagine a hundred years before, or maybe more, it was at its height and it was quite spectacular'.<sup>274</sup> Alan Lee confirms this:

We did put some courses of black stone around the gate, similar to those at Constantinople, and we echoed that Byzantine theme in other aspects of Gondor and her inhabitants. I don't know if Tolkien had the latter stages of the crumbling Roman Empire in

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<sup>269</sup> Alan Lee, p. 93.

<sup>270</sup> Russell, *The Art of Lord of the Rings*, p. 133.

<sup>271</sup> Tolkien, *Letters*, p. 281.

<sup>272</sup> Russell, *The Art of The Fellowship of the Ring*, p. 111.

<sup>273</sup> Gary Russell, *The Art of The Return of the King* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004), p. 27.

<sup>274</sup> Russell, *The Art of The Return of the King*, p. 31.

mind when he was thinking about Gondor under the Stewards, but it seemed an appropriate reference point for us.<sup>275</sup>

The architecture does evoke an archaic Italian style reflected in the terraced houses of the city. Furthermore, the citadel is depicted in the style of a late antique or early medieval cathedral. The interior of the citadel is shown as with a long nave flanked by bichromatic columns, ending with the royal seats of the king and the steward, under a round dome decorated by a gilded mosaic. This uses the imagery of Romanesque (such as that of Durham Cathedral), or Byzantine and Byzantine-revival architecture as seen in Westminster cathedral. The mosaic-decorated dome is typical of the Byzantine style, as used in ecclesiastical buildings like the Hagia Sophia.

The depiction of the evil places and people of Middle-earth relies upon a hypermedieval rather than medieval aesthetic; John Howe said 'Sauron's architectural forays fall on the sinister side of "neo-gothic"'<sup>276</sup> and describes his design for the armour of Sauron also as 'spikey, extravagant and gothic'.<sup>277</sup> Though reminiscent of the highly detailed ornamentation of Gothic revival architecture, the edges of the evil architecture in the film are sharper, and the floating spires have morphed into spikes. Stephen Woodward and Kostis Kourelis describe the architectural aesthetic:

All the evil cities are depicted in a consistent style [...] an exaggerated Gothic fashion. The predominant colour is black and the predominant material is metal. This overbearingly dark metallic environment resembles the torture fantasy environments of the popular imagination. [...] Molten fire and machines underlie the environment of evil; even the Orcs have metal prosthetics which are all redundantly decorated with painful spiky elements. Here the molten process (industry) meets a perpendicular Gothic that has metamorphosed into a machine.<sup>278</sup>

Neo-gothic design frequently used cast iron, but by twisting and sharpening the edges, the art designers of *The Lord of the Rings* exaggerate medieval shapes into something perverse and

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<sup>275</sup> Russell, *The Art of the Return of the King*, p. 25.

<sup>276</sup> Russell, *The Art of The Lord of the Rings*, p. 125.

<sup>277</sup> Russell, *The Art of The Fellowship of the Ring*, p. 134.

<sup>278</sup> Steven Woodward and Kostis Kourelis, 'Urban Legend: Architecture in The Lord of the Rings', in *From Hobbits to Hollywood: Essays on Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings*, ed. by Murray Pomerance and Ernest Mathijs (New York, NY: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 198-213 (p. 203).

threatening. When these buildings use stone, they resemble obsidian – volcanic glass – which gives the architecture a threatening edge.

In summary, though *The Lord of the Rings* films present a fantasy world, the filmmakers have rendered this world by drawing upon architecture and costume from many real historical cultures. Though some of these cultures are recognisably medieval, some are not. However, even when the film is presenting non-medieval cultures, they often retain enough of the technology and iconography of the Middle Ages to render the films recognisably medieval overall.

### **Medieval technology and iconography**

Even when the *Lord of the Rings* films depict places and cultures which are aesthetically derived from periods other than the Middle Ages (like the Byzantium of Gondor or the neo-Gothic of evil), the overriding technological level and iconic images in the film are those of the Middle Ages. This is most apparent in the depiction of military technology, which is dominated by five uniquely medieval features: the knight, the longbow, the longsword, the castle and the siege engine.

Medieval warfare is defined, in part, by the dominance of the knight on the battlefield. During the High Middle Ages the knight was the supreme aristocrat-warrior; the clash of heavy cavalry was decisive in many, if not most battles of that period. During antiquity, cavalry were useful auxiliaries but, particularly since the stirrup had yet to be invented, they were not central to warfare. As well, during the early modern period and beyond, though cavalry were used until even the early twentieth century, they were rarely the deciding factor on the battlefield in the way that they were during the Middle Ages. Additionally, neither in antiquity nor modernity did cavalry fight in heavy armour, with lance, sword and shield. In *Lord of the Rings*, two cultures can be regarded as fielding soldiers who bear resemblance to medieval knights: Rohan and Gondor. Though neither were explicitly based on high or late-medieval European cultures, both of them field cavalry which bear resemblance to the iconic knight of that period. The Rohirrim are dressed in Norman-style helmets (with the signature nasal guard) and maille hauberks, similar to the

depictions of the Normans in the eleventh-century Bayeux tapestry.<sup>279</sup> This corresponds with Tolkien's assertion that:

The Rohirrim were not 'mediaeval', in our sense. The styles of the Bayeux Tapestry (made in England) fit them well enough, if one remembers that the kind of tennis-nets [the] soldiers seem to have on are only a clumsy conventional sign for chainmail of small rings.<sup>280</sup>

One difference between the depiction of the riders of Rohan in *Return of the King* and that of a medieval knight is that the Rohirrim fight with a spear held overhead and often thrown (or occasionally with a bow), whereas knights more commonly fought with a spear or lance couched under their arm and never with a bow. Cavalry fighting with a spear overhead or thrown predates the Middle Ages and the knight. The Bayeux Tapestry depicts an intermediary period between the overhead and the couched technique; both are depicted in the tapestry's account of the Battle of Hastings.<sup>281</sup> Also, in both *The Two Towers* and *Return of the King*, the massed cavalry charge of the Rohirrim is seen as decisive, and in the latter, the *mise-en-scène* of the charge of the Rohirrim pays homage to the similar cavalry charge in Laurence Olivier's version of *Henry V*.<sup>282</sup>

The Gondorians are also field knights, but ones drawn from the history and material culture of the fourteenth century. The scene in which Faramir makes his doomed attempt to retake Osgiliath resembles an archetypal late-medieval cavalry charge. He and his men all wear the polished full plate armour harnesses of a late-medieval chivalric knight, evoking the image of the fairy-tale 'knight in shining armour'. Though breastplates were used before and after the Middle Ages, the full harness including leg and arm armour is a feature exclusive to the Late Middle Ages. This scene paints Faramir as the quintessential knight in deed as well. He conforms neatly to the contemporary idea of 'chivalry', which focuses upon bravery, loyalty and service even in the face of certain death (and echoed in *Kingdom of Heaven*). At the command of his father-lord, Faramir rides out with his men to retake Osgiliath, though he knows it to be suicidal.

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<sup>279</sup> David M. Wilson, *The Bayeux Tapestry* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985). This garb is common throughout the tapestry and can be seen in plates 52-73 of the Wilson facsimile.

<sup>280</sup> Tolkien, *Letters*, pp. 280-281.

<sup>281</sup> For example: Wilson, *The Bayeux Tapestry*, plate 63-64.

<sup>282</sup> Laurence Olivier, *Henry V* (Eagle-Lion Distributors Limited, 1944).

This scene can be read as a re-enactment of the battles of Agincourt, Crécy and Poitiers. In both *Lord of the Rings* and history, a force of heavy knights rode against a fortified position of longbowmen; in both, the longbowmen cut down the knights. Both historical accounts of those battles and the film view longbowmen as socially and morally inferior. In Jean Froissart's *Chronicles*, longbowmen are regarded as inferior due to their social status as commoners and also their tactics. Longbowmen fielded by the English were paid, professional soldiers, and as a result were regarded as inferior by their warrior-aristocrat foes.<sup>283</sup> Also, they used ranged weapons; this puts them outside the chivalric paradigm where honour was earned and proved through a test of arms against an equal opponent.<sup>284</sup> The use of bows also flew in the face of the capture-and-ransom culture which was central to high-medieval chivalric warfare; an arrow could not capture its foe, and a knight could not yield in the face of one. The bowmen facing Faramir's army are similarly condemned; they are orcs who bear grotesque facial deformities. Their arrows are painted black and are unnaturally thick, and their bows creak menacingly under the strain. In both history and the film, the menace lies in the weapon's power; they are seen as evil because they are designed to kill without mercy. The scene builds tension by using slow-motion and draining the diegetic sound to a distant echo (which implies inevitability and hopelessness). The sound of the charge is replaced with Pippin's voice in high, mournful and unaccompanied song. At the moment of climactic clash, the scene abruptly cuts away to an image seen as if in an allegorical mirror: a tomato explodes in Denethor's mouth and the red juice runs down his face in grotesque close-up. He cracks a chicken bone, and slams it on his metal plate. This evokes the clashing shield, the rending armour, the breaking bones and the flowing blood of his son, while Denethor sates

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<sup>283</sup> The University of Southampton and the ICMA centre completed a project in 2009 entitled *The Soldier in Later Medieval England* which explored 'the emergence of professional soldiery between 1369 and 1453', and has resulted in an online database of information about professional soldiers in the Hundred Years' War. Adrian R. Bell and Anne Curry, 'The Soldier in Later Medieval England: An Exciting AHRC Research Project', *ICMA Centre* <<http://www.icmacentre.ac.uk/soldier/database/>> [accessed 2 September 2010].

<sup>284</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 111-113. The Bowman's relegation to the status of 'sub-warrior' has a tradition which reaches back to ancient Greece. As Euripides wrote, 'Carrying a bow, the most cowardly of weapons, he was always ready to flee'. Euripides, *The Heracles of Euripides*, ed. by Michael R. Halleran (Newburyport, MA: Focus Information Group, 1988), p. 21.



himself, contemptibly indifferent. This moment evokes the same sentiment as Jean Froissart's famous summation of the battle of Poitiers: '*Et fu là morte, si com on recordoit adonc pour le temps, toute li fleur de la chevalerie de France: de quoi li nobles royaumes fu durement afoiblis, et en grant misère et tribulation eschei*'.<sup>285</sup>

The longsword is also one of the icons of the Middle Ages which is used heavily by the *The Lord of the Rings* films. Swords before and after the Middle Ages were distinctly different to the longsword; prior to the Middle Ages swords were shorter and thicker, used primarily for stabbing due to the lack of metallurgical developments which allowed for longer, lighter blades. In the modern period these metallurgical developments continued, which allowed for the slimmer fencing blades which are icons of the Early Modern period.<sup>286</sup> The straight single-hand and hand-and-a-half swords seen in *The Lord of the Rings* are clearly those of the Middle Ages. Additionally, the focus on the pedigree of the blade, and the blade as a symbol of aristocratic authority is reflective of the earlier Middle Ages as well.<sup>287</sup>

Magical ancestral swords are common tropes in medieval romance literature. During the high Middle Ages the sword was iconic of the status of the knight and regarded as the most chivalric weapon. We have come to think of swords as symbolic of knighthood; though the dubbing ceremony commonly understood to involve a tap on both shoulders with the tip of a sword is unlikely to have occurred in that form during the Middle Ages; that image has taken root since the late nineteenth century. As a result, the sword is an instrument which contains the regal authority to confer knighthood. Similarly, Aragorn's blade Narsil (later Anduril) in *Return of the King* takes both the form and function of the king's ancestral sword. The sword is designed as a hypermedieval version of a hand-and-a-half sword. It resembles a medieval sword in all things

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<sup>285</sup> 'There died that day, it was said, the finest flower of French chivalry, whereby the realm of France was sorely weakened and fell into great misery and affliction'. Jean Froissart, *Chronicles*, ed. by Geoffrey Brereton, trans. by Geoffrey Brereton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 143.

<sup>286</sup> These are necessary generalisations, as a full description of the history of the sword is beyond the purview of this study. But for more on the development of the sword over time and especially the medieval European sword, see: Richard Cohen, *By the Sword* (London: Random House, 2002); Ewart Oakeshott, *The Sword in the Age of Chivalry* (London: Lutterworth P, 1964).

<sup>287</sup> For more on the sword as a symbol in medieval culture and literature, see: Hilda Ellis Davidson, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England: Its Archaeology and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

except that it has an elegant void in the pommel which would be impossible to achieve using medieval technology. John Howe designed the blade for the film, and said 'Narsil is actually I'm sure the only sword that's ever been designed with a hollow pommel, but it's still got enough weight to make it work'.<sup>288</sup> The sword has the legendary pedigree of medieval romance: it was used by the ancestral king to defeat Sauron in a previous age. The blade is emblematic of the king: the blade is broken and so too is the royal lineage. The sword is re-forged when an heir to the line, Aragorn, is found; but he is only given the sword when ready to assume the throne. Elrond gives him the blade with the words: 'The man who can wield the power of this sword can summon to him an army more deadly than any that walks this earth. Put aside the ranger. Become who you were born to be.' The sword's royal magic power becomes clear; Aragorn uses it to extract an oath from the king of the dead under the mountain:

ARAGORN:                    I summon you to fulfil your oath.  
 KING OF THE DEAD:        None but the king of Gondor may command me.  
 [*Swings sword; Aragorn blocks with Anduril*]  
 KING OF THE DEAD:        That blade was broken!  
 [*Aragorn takes him by the throat*]  
 ARAGORN:                    It has been remade. Fight for us and regain your honour.

Additionally, the film is recognisably medieval in aesthetic because it lacks one of the prime icons of modernity on the battlefield: the gun. The development and deployment of guns was one of the foremost differences between medieval and modern warfare. The extensive use of cannon and hand-cannons in the battle of Bosworth Field (1485) has recently been archaeologically proven, but as David Grummitt observes, guns 'had been a feature of English and European armies for almost a hundred years before they revolutionised the practice of war in the years between 1420 and 1450'.<sup>289</sup> However, their use before the Wars of the Roses is sporadic. Since Bosworth is regarded as one of the last, if not the last battle of the Middle Ages in England, this serves to

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<sup>288</sup> Peter Jackson, *Weta Workshop: The Fellowship of the Ring Extended Edition, Appendices Disc 1* (New Line Cinema, 2002).

<sup>289</sup> Glenn Foard, 'Bosworth Battlefield - Statement by Glenn Foard', *Bosworth Battlefield* <[http://www.bosworthbattlefield.com/battle/archaeology/battlefield/battlefield\\_bft.htm](http://www.bosworthbattlefield.com/battle/archaeology/battlefield/battlefield_bft.htm)> [accessed 22 May 2010]; David Grummitt, *The Calais Garrison: War and Military Service in England, 1436-1558* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2008), p. 133.

reinforce the conception that modern warfare is defined by firepower. Due to the development of the gun, many castles were redesigned or abandoned entirely in the face of their destructive power. Prior to the invention of the gun, castle assaults were carried out with the assistance of siege engines which overcame walls (ladders or siege towers) flung projectiles mechanically (catapults, ballistae or trebuchets) or used blunt force (rams). Of these, the counterweighted trebuchet is the most sophisticated and unique to the Middle Ages. *The Lord of the Rings* depicts a pre-gun world in which these technologies are deployed. In the climactic sieges in both *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*, the forces of evil use siege towers, ladders, catapults, ballistae, and battering rams to overcome the defences of their opponents. By contrast, in *Return of the King* the forces of good are shown deploying the more elegant and technologically advanced trebuchet to fend off the attackers. The siege weapons of evil fling (or in the case of the battering ram Grond, breathe) fire and are fabricated in black iron with menacing hypermedieval gothic spikes. The trebuchets of the good are made of wood and fling pieces of reclaimed masonry. Fire and forged iron versus wood and carved stone make explicit a theme of *The Lord of the Rings*, namely, the struggle between 'evil' modern industrial mechanisation and 'good' medieval craftsmanship and nature.<sup>290</sup> It is also emblematic of the desperation of the struggle, where the Gondorians are forced to literally fling pieces of their crumbling civilisation in order to stave off their foes.

## Conclusion

*The Lord of the Rings*, therefore, if not medieval, has a recognisably medieval setting. The author's original narrative is based upon the languages, literatures and mythologies of the medieval cultures that he studied professionally. The films are rooted aesthetically in a variety of medieval cultures. The world-view of the films is recognisably medieval: one of its narratives privileges

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<sup>290</sup> This echoes the anti-industrial political ideologies of John Ruskin and later William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement. E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, Rev. ed. (London: Merlin Press, 1977), pp. 642-645.

aristocratic heroism, and there is an overarching connection between nature and craftsmanship (as opposed to industrial mechanisation) which is a feature of medieval and medievalist narratives. The technological level and mode of warfare is that of the Middle Ages. This means that overall, though the world is not explicitly of the Middle Ages, it bears enough resemblance to the Middle Ages to be considered in a study which focuses upon the public understanding of the period.

This analysis does beg a question: does the audience regard the film as recognisably medieval? Some medievalists may be inclined to see evidence of the medieval in these films because they have been trained to recognise it. With that said, if these medieval resonances exist without being understood by their audience, is this not a tree falling silently in the forest? The following chapters will explore how these audiences understand the Middle Ages and how three 'medieval' films may contribute to their understanding of the past.

## Chapter 5: Results I – Participants' understanding of the Middle Ages

We do not see things as they are, we see things as we are.<sup>291</sup>

Anaïs Nin, *Seduction of the Minotaur*

This chapter presents findings from the focus group interviews in relation to the first and second research questions: 'How did the participants describe their understanding of the Middle Ages' and 'What influences or experiences in their lives, past or present, do these students describe as influencing their understanding of the Middle Ages?'

There are two main sources of data for the results: (a) the 'stream of consciousness' exercises given at the beginning of six of the focus group meetings and (b) transcripts of the ten focus group meetings described in chapter 3. A series of sub-questions was also addressed: 'How do participants describe their understanding of crusade?', 'Do they perceive differences between the words 'medieval' and 'Middle Ages?', and 'What do they cite as sources for their understandings about the Middle Ages?'

The remainder of this thesis (chapters five, six and seven) explores the participants' ideas about the Middle Ages in light of the categories established by the stream-of-consciousness exercises. It looks at how the participants define the period, their ideas about class, warfare and religion. It seeks to understand the relationship between the Middle Ages and the medieval legend and fantasy. Since the discussion of the second meeting of each of the spring groups centred on participants' ideas about 'crusade'; this chapter will accordingly also examine those ideas, and it will investigate where participants reported having learned their ideas about the Middle Ages. Finally, it will examine whether in their discussions any subtle distinctions arose between the concepts of 'Middle Ages' and 'medieval'.

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<sup>291</sup> Anaïs Nin, *Seduction of the Minotaur* (London: A. Swallow, 1961), p. 124.

**Transcript and report conventions**

In all sociological research reporting, a balance must be struck between accurate depiction of the content and flow of conversation, and the readability of the subsequent transcript. Wherever possible, participants' quotes have been reported verbatim, including hesitations, grammatical errors, repeated words, idiosyncratic pronunciation and word fragments. This has been done to preserve not just the words spoken but the manner in which they were said - an aspect that can be of importance in interpretation. To assist readability, a minimum number of transcript conventions were retained in the report. Square brackets containing an ellipsis ([...]) indicate a point where an irrelevant section has been removed. Square brackets containing text enclose an explanatory comment inserted by the author. Within the flow of text, one line terminating and the next beginning with an equal sign (=) indicates that a participant was interrupted without gap by another, and that the second speaker latched on to what the first said (generally in moments of heated conversation). An opening square bracket ([) indicates the onset of an overlapping exchange where two or more were talking at the same time, and a closing square bracket (]) indicates the end of that overlapping exchange. An un-bracketed ellipsis indicates speech trailing off, and a dash (-) indicates where a speaker stopped short. Finally, the word laugh in round brackets (laugh) indicates where one or more participants laughed. Accurate reporting of pauses and tonal inflection has been omitted except where their inclusion would affect understanding. In such a case, an explanation is offered in square brackets. For ethical reasons, all participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

**The participants**

Nineteen people participated in a total of four groups. Figure 2 (below) provides basic demographic information about them. There were eleven women and eight men. Each group had between four and six participants. Eight of the students were studying arts subjects and twelve the sciences (Stephen is counted in both categories as he is studying both music and

mathematics). All participants were between nineteen and twenty-four years of age, with 84% being between nineteen and twenty-one.

Each group differed in character from the others. Over the course of the sessions the moderator encouraged responses from all participants, but some were naturally more or less forthcoming. In particular, Chloe and Erica in the April group, Dan, Mark and Jess in the May group

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Group</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>YOB</b>	<b>Course of Study</b>
<b>Catherine</b>	November	F	1989	Fashion Design
<b>Eleanor</b>	November	F	1988	Pharmacology
<b>Elizabeth</b>	November	F	1988	Mathematics
<b>Emma</b>	November	F	1989	Psychology
<b>Jane</b>	November	F	1989	Law
<b>Carin</b>	April	F	1988	Theology and Religious Studies
<b>Chloe</b>	April	F	1985	Medicine
<b>Erica</b>	April	F	1985	Zoology
<b>Rob</b>	April	M	1988	Philosophy
<b>Dan</b>	May	M	1990	Mathematics
<b>Jake</b>	May	M	1988	Product Design
<b>Jess</b>	May	F	1986	Physics
<b>John</b>	May	M	1988	Physics
<b>Laura</b>	May	F	1990	Linguistics and Phonetics
<b>Mark</b>	May	M	1990	Mathematics
<b>Justin</b>	June	M	1989	Biology
<b>Katy</b>	June	F	1988	English and History
<b>Sean</b>	June	M	1988	Biology
<b>Stephen</b>	June	M	1989	Music and Mathematics

**Figure 2: Demographic information of research participants**

and Justin and Stephen in the June group were more talkative than their counterparts. The June focus group was made up of a group of friends (which resulted in a freer, if less focused, discussion), whereas the other three groups consisted of strangers. This analysis and reporting has attempted to ensure that all participants' opinions are included no matter how talkative or reticent they were. With that said, the transcript inevitably conveys more fully the opinions of those who were freer with them.

### **Overarching goals**

While the overall goal of the research questions was to probe the participants' understanding of the Middle Ages, the analysis focuses upon those instances where participants' understandings deviated from, rather than coincided with, a scholarly understanding of the subject matter. If a participant were to report that his or her understanding of the topic coincides with academic thinking, this may indicate that they have studied well. However, each anachronism or error is a kind of Freudian slip; the utterances can be mined for further understandings about *why* the error was made and what this reveals about the individual's conception of the topic in question. The intention of this analysis (and by proxy this research in general) is not simply to point out where the participants 'go wrong' in terms of their understanding of history; that would show an unhelpful arrogance. For instance, it can be assumed that the participants' knowledge of their own specialist areas, such as Biology or Law, are substantially more sophisticated than my own. That said, the purpose of this research is to examine their ideas, (and, where appropriate, to point out misconceptions – in those instances where a misconception may indicate a deeper cultural myth) to attempt to trace the sources of those ideas, and ultimately, to examine what role contemporary popular films play in their formulation.

### **Establishing the mainstream: results of the stream of consciousness exercise**

As noted earlier, participants were asked to complete stream of consciousness exercises where they wrote their associations with the words 'medieval', 'Middle Ages' and 'crusade'. The responses were analysed by performing a frequency count of responses. Problematically, there were many similar terms. Terms that were obviously synonyms were collapsed together; for example 'black death', 'black plague' and 'plague' were combined into 'disease' (though if a person wrote more than one they were only counted once). Other terms did not require collapsing because word choice amongst participants was more consistent (e.g. 'Castles' or



'Jesters'). Figure 3 and Figure 4 provide a list of the terms which were mentioned by more than three people across all the groups.

<b>Medieval</b>	<b>#</b>
Castles	10
Knights	10
Armour	7
Disease (inc. Plague, Black Death)	6
Battles	5
Crusades	5
Kings	4
Queens	4
Peasants	4
Clothes	4
Swords	4
Feasts (inc. Banquets)	4
Dirty (inc. Mud, Bad Hygiene)	4
Religion (inc. the Church, Christianity)	3
Dragons	3
Jesters	3
Torture	3
Jousting	3
War	3
King Arthur	3
History	3
Horses	3

**Figure 3: Responses to 'Medieval' stream of consciousness exercises and frequency (3+)**

<b>Middle Ages</b>	<b>#</b>
Disease	10
Knights	8
Castles	8
Jousting	5
Poverty	5
Battles	5
Dirty (inc. mud)	5
Religion (inc the Church, Christianity)	5
Armour	4
War	4
Peasants	4
Crusades	4
King Arthur	4
Robin Hood	4
Swords	4
Farming	4
Henry VIII	4
Vikings	3
Kings	3
Dark Ages	3
Horses	3
Divide between Rich and Poor	3

**Figure 4: Responses to 'Middle Ages' stream of consciousness exercises and frequency (3+)**

The results of the stream of consciousness exercise indicate core elements most common to participants' understanding of the period. Some patterns emerge: in both, warfare (cited generally on both lists, but also specifically as knights, castles, armour, swords and crusades) figures heavily. Figures associated with particular social classes, such as 'kings', 'queens' and 'peasants' are mentioned in each. Social inequality (poverty, divide between rich and poor) featured as well, especially in 'Middle Ages'. Each has a sense of the period being dirty and unpleasant, either in terms of the environment (mud), people (bad hygiene), or social conditions (poverty, war, torture). Legendary figures (King Arthur, dragons, Robin Hood) were mentioned as often, if not

more, than historical ones. The only historical figure who was mentioned by more than three people was Henry VIII, which is surprising considering that he is not indisputably medieval. The Church gets some mention, but only in general terms or in the context of crusade.

The stream of consciousness exercise, therefore, gauges the mainstream of thought amongst these participants. But in order to go beyond a mainstream reading, the transcripts must be interrogated.

### **Locating the Middle Ages in time and space**

The research was designed to allow the participants to define what was most important in their own terms. Participants were never asked to define the period covered by the Middle Ages. This was by design, to avoid giving a sense that the focus groups were intended to test their knowledge of history, and so lead to feelings of judgement or defensiveness. Additionally, this might have conveyed a sense that dates and names were of primary importance, perhaps reinforcing the common misconception that history is only a 'series of dates and names'. Even so, some participants took it upon themselves to say when they felt the Middle Ages began and ended. Some participants also defined the Middle Ages geographically, as a national or regional, rather than temporal, phenomenon.

### **Attempting to place the Middle Ages in time**

Catherine: I think of 'medieval' as like a very, very, very, very, very long time ago.

*November 2008 Focus Group*

Participants had difficulty setting the temporal boundaries of the Middle Ages. This is not entirely surprising, considering that academics themselves continue to debate where and on what basis those boundaries should be drawn. Leonardo Bruni, fifteenth-century Italian historian and author of the twelve-part *History of the Florentine People* was one of the first to divide history into the tripartite framework of 'ancient' (or 'classical'), 'medieval' and 'modern'. He placed the end of the

‘ancient’ period at the deposition of the last Emperor of the Western Roman Empire, Augustulus, in 476CE, and ended the medieval period in the middle of the thirteenth century, with the downfall of the Holy Roman Empire as a major influence in Italian politics.<sup>292</sup> While the start point in 476CE is admittedly arbitrary, it is a bracket which has been used by subsequent historians with relatively little shifting. The end point, on the other hand, is more controversial. The *OED*’s definition of the Middle Ages (discussed below at footnote 329) places it between the fall of the Roman Empire (which it in turn places at ‘c.500CE’) and the Fall of Constantinople in 1453. Defining an end for the Middle Ages is a question of what makes the period unique or different from the period(s) that followed. Some see the crucial break as the Protestant Reformation. Some historians of England regard it as the ascension of the Tudor Dynasty, the dissolution of the monasteries or the establishment of the Church of England. Some art historians regard the crucial break as the Renaissance, when a self-conscious return to Classical models in contradistinction to Gothic ones can be observed in architectural design. The ‘Renaissance’ is difficult to define temporally because it spread variably across Europe, bringing the ‘Middle Ages’ to a close in different countries at different times. Hence, while Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* is regarded as one of the great pieces of medieval English literature, Giovanni Boccaccio’s earlier *The Decameron* on which Chaucer’s *Tales* is based, is generally regarded as a work of the Italian Renaissance.

### **Subdividing the Middle Ages: early, high, late, dark**

Historians and the public use a number of different ways to subdivide the Middle Ages.

Contemporary historians often divide the period into three: ‘early’ (c.500 - c.1000CE), ‘high’ (c.1000 -c.1300CE), and ‘late’ (c.1300 - c.1500CE). (Confusingly, however, British archaeologists usually call the period c.500 – c.1050 ‘Anglo-Saxon’, reserving ‘medieval’ for the years between c.1050 – 1500.) Also, though ‘The Dark Ages’ has generally been abandoned by contemporary

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<sup>292</sup> Leonardo Bruni, *History of the Florentine People: Books 1-4 V. 1*, ed. by James Hankins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. xvii-xviii.

historians, the phrase remains common in public parlance, where it may refer either to a part of the Middle Ages (usually corresponding with the 'early' period, above) or the period as a whole.

Petrarch is credited as one of the first to conceptualise the Middle Ages as an age of cultural darkness, rather than the previously-understood paradigm where the Classical world was considered an age of darkness due to the absence of Christ. According to Theodor Mommsen, many Italian writers and artists followed suit:

Men like Boccaccio, Filippo Villani, Ghiberti and others contrasted the 'rebirth' of the arts and letters which, they held, had been effected by Dante, Giotto, and Petrarch, with the preceding period of cultural darkness. With this change of emphasis from things religious to things secular, the significance of the old metaphor became reversed: Antiquity, so long considered as the 'Dark Age,' now became the time of 'light' which had to be 'restored'; the era following Antiquity, on the other hand, was submerged in obscurity.<sup>293</sup>

In his article 'The Humanist Views of the Renaissance', Wallace K. Ferguson concludes that Italian humanist thinkers incited the idea of the Renaissance, and its fundamental differences with the prior period: 'The humanists [...] are in fairly general agreement that there was a decline of ancient civilisation with the decline of Rome and that this decline led to a period of barbaric darkness'.<sup>294</sup> The term 'dark ages' has itself changed meaning over the course of the twentieth century. As Fred C. Robinson recounts,

In popular encyclopaedias and in many of the older dictionaries *Dark Ages* is defined as simply a synonym of *Middle Ages*. In 1904, however, W. P. Ker in his book *The Dark Ages* said that the two terms 'have come to be distinguished, and the Dark Ages are now no more than the first part of the Middle Age, while the term medieval is often restricted to the later centuries, about 1100 to 1500...' This is a distinction which was for a time carefully observed by some historians.<sup>295</sup>

Robinson goes on to conclude that the term 'dark ages' has fallen out of academic parlance due to its connotations of 'intellectual stagnation'. He proposes rehabilitating the term by associating 'dark' instead with 'our dim perception of the period (owing to limited documentary evidence

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<sup>293</sup> Theodore E. Mommsen, 'Petrarch's Conception of the 'Dark Ages'', *Speculum*, 17 (1942), 226-242 (p. 227).

<sup>294</sup> Wallace K. Ferguson, 'Humanist Views of the Renaissance', *The American Historical Review*, 45 (1939), 1-28 (p. 28).

<sup>295</sup> Fred C. Robinson, 'Medieval, the Middle Ages', *Speculum*, 59 (1984), 745-756 (pp. 750-751).

about it)<sup>296</sup> This thesis does not contribute to the debate; however, the fact that there is no academic consensus about dates was reflected in the discussions of the participants. Very few had an idea when the Middle Ages were located in time, barring a vague sense of it being a 'long time ago', a definition within a few hundred years, or employing familiar historical or material cultural anchors (e.g. 1066) in order to define it.

### **Participants' periodisations**

The participants in this study used the term 'dark ages' often, in all of the ways mentioned above: synonymous with 'Middle Ages', referring only to the 'Early Middle Ages', as an indicator of 'intellectual stagnation', and as a scantily-documented period. Elizabeth was insecure about her definition: 'Like 400 years ago I wouldn't associate with medieval I would associate like, maybe a thousand years ago or something like that. [...] That's, that's just what I think of in my mind I don't know whether it's right'. Jess was only slightly more confident. 'I thought Middle Ages was sort of, I don't know, like, 800AD to somewhere in the middle of the thousands, you know what I mean, like, in the middle of what we've been through'. She posited the Middle Ages as a literal middle-period in the history of human civilisation. Later she limited her definition to Britain after 1066: 'I tend to think of like, just, maybe, Norman people in like, Britain, like, after the Norman invasion that's what I tend to think of as the Middle Ages'. By contrast, she defined the word 'medieval' as the end of the period, 'just before like sort of Elizabethan sort of times'.

Mark defined the beginning of the period not by calendrical dates but by both the dominant cultures in England and by a pejorative view of the culture of the Early Middle Ages: 'Well, medieval for me I would say it sort of started pretty much, pretty soon after the Romans moved out and we had all the Anglo-Saxons, Vikings, there's a lot of fighting, a lot of oppression, there wasn't a lot of creativity allowed and, people, generally stagnated for however many hundreds of years'. He differentiates between 'medieval' and 'Middle Ages'; to him, 'Middle Ages I

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<sup>296</sup> Fred C. Robinson, 745-756 (p. 751).

would say is when it all, when there are people, people start to think more freely there's a bit more technological advances you've got catapults you've got proper castles being built instead of just chopping down trees and sticking them in the way of your opponent'. Stephen proposed a similar definition, excluding the early Middle Ages. 'I'd never particularly associated the Vikings with the Middle Ages, the medieval. I have quite a narrow historical view of what the Middle Ages actually are'.

### **Where are the Middle Ages? England, Britain, and Europe**

The bracketing of the 'Middle Ages' roughly between the Roman Empire and the Reformation and/or Renaissance locates the period not only chronologically but geographically. If one is to define the Middle Ages based, on one hand, by the fall of the Roman Empire and on the other by the European Renaissance or the Protestant Reformation, it defines the period *culturally* to include only those cultures which experienced or were impacted upon by those two bracketing events. This defines the 'Middle Ages' based on two primary rubrics: religion and empire. With regards to empire, the Middle Ages is defined by the period which saw the places that were once part of the Roman Empire recover from its economic collapse, then fragment and reform into the city-states and ultimately the nations and ethnicities with which we are more or less familiar today (or the places to which those people spread). This defines the Middle Ages geographically as edged by England, Scotland, Ireland, and Scandinavia in the north, Lithuania and the western reaches of Russia in the North-East, the Holy Land and Egypt in the south-east, and stretching across North Africa to Morocco in the south. It is for this reason that the travels of Marco Polo or the alleged journeys of John de Mandeville were, and still are, considered extraordinary—they are voyages from the known into the unknown, crossing theretofore uncrossed geographical and cultural boundaries out of the Middle Ages and into something else.

In terms of religion, the Middle Ages are defined by hegemonic Christianity. Those few places beyond Christendom which are considered to be a part of the Middle Ages are those places

with which Christianity interacted and had a direct impact: the places of 'pagan' religions (read: polytheistic, for lack of a better term) and the Dar-al Islam. The Middle Ages saw the East-West schism of 1054 which broke the Christian church into Latin West and Greek East. It is the period in which the pagan religions were mostly subsumed or eradicated, and which saw the rise of Islam and the bloody conflicts between it and both branches of Christianity. At its end, the Middle Ages witnessed the challenges posed by Protestantism to the power of the Latin Catholic Church. Therefore, positing the Reformation as the end point of the Middle Ages specifically defines the end of the Middle Ages to be primarily Western European (since it was there that Protestantism rose), even if the beginnings of the period were more widespread geographically.

### **Participants' geographical definitions**

Many participants defined the Middle Ages geographically as well as chronologically, but in a narrow way. They were much more confident and more specific in naming *where* the Middle Ages were than *when*. With only a few exceptions participants projected their own English upbringing upon their understanding of the Middle Ages, locating them in Western Europe, in Britain or in England.

For example, Jane said of her stream of consciousness exercise: 'I wrote down England'. Similarly, in accord with her overall idea that the word 'medieval' referred to legends whereas 'Middle Ages' was historical, Chloe felt 'the big one [difference] is that we thought 'medieval' was like Britain, like British and English whereas 'Middle Ages' was a bit more widespread'. Later, she defined 'a bit more widespread' as 'Western Europe'. Robert agreed, 'When we'd said, like, medieval, we associate it with Britain'.

### **Stretching the boundaries: the Crusades, France, fantasy**

Elizabeth said: 'I didn't write down England but I was just thinking of England, I didn't think of, well, I put Crusades, but English Knights... I wasn't thinking of anywhere else'. Here the Crusades

are mentioned as an exception to the rule rather than as definitive of the rule itself. And even when that exception has been pointed out, the rule is reaffirmed by Elizabeth's insistence that she was thinking primarily of 'English Knights' rather than any other. This was common. In the June group, Justin and Stephen echoed it:

- Justin:           When I think of the Middle Ages it's probably set in Britain to be fair. I would say.
- Stephen:         Or it involves Britain.
- Justin:           Or involves Britain some way yeah.
- Stephen:         It kind of, the war in Jerusalem and stuff.
- Justin:           I mean I know that there must be something, you know=
- Stephen:         =there's other stuff=
- Justin:           =there's other stuff going on and there must be other types of places, but
- Moderator:     So the war in Jerusalem involves Britain how?
- Stephen:         Um, because they sent people to crusade.

Placing England as a central player in the Crusades is a misconception which pervades much Anglo-American popular culture, and is likely a result of the centrality of the Third Crusade in the English popular imagination of the Crusades. English participation in the history of the Crusades as a whole was minor as compared to the French or even German contribution, especially in the early crusading period. Crusade historian Christopher Tyerman writes, 'On the face of it, English involvement in the First Crusade was minimal and peripheral'.<sup>297</sup> The opposition of Richard the Lionheart and Saladin in the Third Crusade gained huge popularity during the nineteenth century as a part of the overall rise in medievalism; Sir Walter Scott's novel *The Talisman* became the prototype and sometimes source for most popular cultural representations of the Third Crusade.<sup>298</sup> In addition, all five films which depict the Crusades in the Holy Land contain both Saladin as a character, and all but *Arn: Knight Templar* contain Richard I.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Christopher Tyerman, *England and the Crusades* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 15.

<sup>298</sup> Tyerman, p. 6.

<sup>299</sup> Those films are: DeMille, *The Crusades*; David Butler, *King Richard and the Crusaders*; Chahine, *El Naser Salah Ad-Din*; Scott, *Kingdom of Heaven*; Flinth, *Arn: The Knight Templar*.



This definition of space even influences participants' perception of medievaesque fantasy spaces. For example, Jane regarded the 1992 film *Aladdin's* setting as exceptional amongst Disney films because it is *not* set in England (as discussed further on page 137).

- Jane: I was just thinking, like you have exceptions like, like something like Aladdin. [...] obviously that's set in, been set in kind of like... England, forest and that sort of setting, it's been moved across to...
- Moderator: Oh, you mean it's not set in [England and forest
- Jane: Yeah it's] got a completely different setting=
- Moderator: =So are the other ones set in England and forests and stuff?
- Jane: Or France, I suppose, technically.

Wooded landscape is here identified both with the Middle Ages generally and England specifically. France is mentioned but only hesitantly, as an aside and technicality. France was included as a 'technicality' numerous times by this group, and also by Jess in the May group. Eleanor went on to explain her rationale for including France in the Middle Ages: 'I had France as well, but that was because of the guillotine and, well, Marie Antoinette sort of things.' The fact that she felt the need to explain why her Middle Ages included France when unprompted to do so by the group belies a discomfort with the idea of expanding the Middle Ages beyond English borders. Her misconception that the period of the guillotine and Marie Antoinette was within the Middle Ages is unsurprising, given its context. Marie Antoinette is a symbol of opulence and wealth, of absolute monarchy and of the grisly results of such excesses of wealth and power. These concepts were frequently repeated by many participants, and will be discussed further below. The guillotine, as well as being an object symbolically tied to the fate of Antoinette is also symbol of punishment and public execution.<sup>300</sup> This fits neatly with the popular notion which identifies torture and public execution with the Middle Ages as part of the cruelty and barbarity of the age. This will also be discussed further below (p. 152).

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<sup>300</sup> This is particularly ironic as the guillotine, at its invention, was considered a more humane way to execute than the methods that had been used previously.

### **Why do participants limit the Middle Ages to Western Europe?**

John felt that films helped to establish this sense of the Middle Ages being limited to a few locales within Western Europe:

...in terms of film anyway, there doesn't seem to be anything set in this sort of time, sort of outside some parts of Europe. [...] I can't picture what It- Italy would have been like in these periods because it's never ever been discussed really [...] and obviously any other continent as well. Like, obviously there's other sort of stuff going on but it doesn't come to mind at all.

Jess then followed with 'I just sort of assumed the rest of the world doesn't exist. [...] I didn't think of anything in Africa, or anything, I only think of like England. And not gonna say like Scotland, just literally England is all I think of when I think of this sort of period [...] and a bit of Wales'.

John had a different view, 'when you talk like ages, they never refer to the whole world. Like, each uh, sort of not necessarily country but they all have their own time lines'. Dan agreed: 'Middle Ages is reflective only of a country, at the same time, time is still going on in other countries'. So, there was some disagreement over whether history should be thought of in terms of international and intercultural chronologies or of national or cultural ones. However, nearly all felt that the Middle Ages, at their broadest, encompassed Western Europe, and at their narrowest, defined them as English.

This outlook may be a result of the English National Curriculum that, since 1991, has been restricted to a few units about Britain's Middle Ages, rather than the Middle Ages as a broader European phenomenon (see p. 132). In addition, very little Anglophonic medievalist popular culture is set anywhere outside the British Isles. The medieval legends to which the participants had been commonly exposed (Robin Hood, King Arthur) are English, and often evince a nationalistic tone. Possibly as a result of this, the participants subsumed Anglophonic fantasy worlds (like those in Disney) into a vision of a specifically and almost exclusively English Middle Ages.

**Research question 2: What influences or experiences in their lives, past or present, do these students describe as influencing their understanding of the Middle Ages?**

One question routinely asked by the moderator was ‘where do you feel you gained your ideas about the Middle Ages?’ Many sources were given, but Stephen and Sean expressed the difficulty in answering satisfactorily:

- Stephen: I don’t know. On the one hand it would be interesting to know where all our preconceptions come from but on the other, we can’t. Whenever you’ve asked that question we just don’t, it just come from somewhere.
- Sean: It just comes from loads and loads of things.
- Stephen: So I don’t, it could have just been at a very very young age that we kinda got these ideas in our head and that kinda, I mean like we said yesterday about gut reactions, that you know that something is true.

This is reasonable. It is impossible for a person to know every source for their knowledge on anything, since we are being continually bombarded with new information. Our schemata are constantly under construction, and the sources of information are often forgotten. Therefore the reports of the participants cannot be considered definitive or complete. With that said, they remain a useful window into their memories of learning about the Middle Ages. The following section will accordingly explore the basic categories cited: school, childhood popular culture, and adult popular culture.

**Childhood: Growing up in the Middle Ages**

When asked where they felt they gained their knowledge of the Middle Ages, most participants initially responded by recounting experiences learning about the period during their childhood. They cited learning that they felt was acquired either from schooling or popular culture which is aimed specifically at children. However, it may be inappropriate to differentiate between popular culture which is aimed at children rather than that which is aimed at adults, since some reported seeing popular culture ostensibly made for adults (like *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* or *Indiana*

*Jones and the Last Crusade*) as children, and enjoying popular culture made for children (like Disney films) as adults.

### **Primary school and the English National Curriculum**

Participants frequently spoke about their experience learning about the Middle Ages in school. Since the sample excluded anyone who had learned about the Middle Ages at GCSE level or above (as outlined in chapter 3), the school learning that was reported was almost exclusively at primary level. Participants often reported negative reactions to these memories. While John and Mark felt that the learning they had acquired from popular culture and from school were inseparable, Dan argued that 'I felt like I can separate it in this case because I felt like I learned nothing about this from school'. Emma echoed Dan's complaint: 'I remember doing it [the Middle Ages] in school but a tiny bit and I'm sure that I didn't really learn anything'. Participants particularly criticised the intense focus on certain aspects of history over others. For example, Dan said 'history, we'll learn about the Nazis. Anything before that we're gonna forget [...] it seems like this topic [the Middle Ages] and other topics, Romans for example or Saxons of, just, most, most history it seems like we were taught that at primary school level as if to demean it'.

Participants reported that their understanding of history had been compartmentalised into strict periods. Stephen said that his education presented a 'neat segmented view of history that you have the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings and then the Middle Ages and then the Tudors'. Aside from these, the only other historical periods mentioned by participants were 'Baroque' (in reference to a question as to whether Baroque music was medieval), 'the Reformation', 'the Restoration', 'the Victorians' and 'the Second World War' (sometimes referred to as 'The Nazis'). Any periods between these or sense of transition from one era to another were not mentioned. Dan alone saw this strict periodisation as an aid to his understanding: 'I can fit other things that I know happened around that time into a box of when it happened. And if I can't accurately know that these other things are happening, then I can't really picture what's happening'.

This sense of strict periodisation with little transition or continuum is possibly a result of the modularisation of primary school education since the institution of the English National Curriculum. The National Curriculum, established in 1991 and revised in 1999 (though without significant revision to its medieval history requirements) relies upon a sense of discrete periods of history into which events are placed. History is divided into modules with titles like ‘Tudor and Stuart times’ ‘Victorian Britain’, ‘The Roman Empire’ and ‘The Era of the Second World War’.<sup>301</sup> Medieval history is taught twice: once during key stage two (ages 7-11) and once at key stage three (11-14). At key stage two, students are taught Iron Age through early medieval British history in: ‘Invaders and settlers: Romans, Anglo-Saxons and Vikings in Britain’. After this, in key stage two, students do not proceed chronologically to learn about the later Middle Ages, but skip ahead to ‘Tudor and Stuart times’. Students return to the Middle Ages at key stage three, in a module entitled ‘Medieval realms: Britain 1066 to 1500’. This may explain the notion encountered above, the Early Middle Ages are not part of the Middle Ages.

The English National Curriculum focuses on the national history of the British Isles; the Middle Ages outside Britain are rarely addressed, and when they are it is only in relation to how the wider world is relevant to Britain. For example, in the ‘Britain and the wider world’ subsection of the key stage three module ‘Medieval Realms: Britain 1066 to 1500’ it explains: ‘pupils should be taught about [...] the idea of Christendom and the extent to which the British Isles were part of a wider European world’.<sup>302</sup> In the *National Curriculum Council Consultation Report* of 1990, this focus is made clear. Under the curriculum unit of ‘Medieval realms: Britain 1066 to 1500’ (taught at key stage three), it reads: ‘pupils should be taught about the major feature in Britain’s medieval past and the legacy of the Middle Ages to the modern world. The focus should be on the development of the medieval monarchy, and the way of life of the people of the British Isles’.<sup>303</sup>

Optional ‘supplementary study units’ include ‘Castles and Cathedrals: 1066-1500’, ‘Relations

<sup>301</sup> National Curriculum Council, *History in the National Curriculum (England)* (London: Department of Education and Science, 1991), pp. 19-45.

<sup>302</sup> National Curriculum Council, p. 39.

<sup>303</sup> National Curriculum Council, *National Curriculum Council Consultation Report: History* (York: National Curriculum Council, 1990), p. 51.

between England and Scotland from the Norman Conquest to the Treaty of Union’ and ‘the Crusades’. This near-exclusive focus on the history of Britain has the potential to lead children unconsciously to identify the Middle Ages as being a British rather than European phenomenon – a perception which participants in this study almost universally echoed. Additionally, the modularisation and periodisation presented by the National Curriculum does not help students to understand the broader picture of worldwide historical movements or phenomena, or the transition between periods as anything other than a complete cognitive break. This is exacerbated by the fact that history is not taught sequentially, and as a result any idea of transition or change between discrete periods of history is lost. It makes 1066 and 1500 centrally important dates in British history, and since medieval history outside Britain is not usually taught, by extension medieval history more broadly.

Even though most participants did not hold very high opinions of the education in medieval history that they received in primary school, the paradigms established by the National Curriculum were often repeated in their discussions. As a result, the cycle continues; these participants, or their peers, are preparing to start as primary school teachers today. As a result, there is no reason these same ideas will continue.

### **Learning outside the classroom**

Catherine: It helps you learn, when you’re doin’ it. You’re not re-living it, but...

*November Focus Group*

In the final report of the National Curriculum History Working Group in 1990, the group made a positive estimation of the value of experiential learning as a way to engender children’s interest in history. They wrote that ‘It is important that field trips, and museum and site visits, form an integral part of the school curriculum for history [...] The use of all the senses can convey an image

of living in the past in a way that a narrative account may fail to do'.<sup>304</sup> The participants in this study agreed; they consistently felt that experiential learning was more memorable than their classroom learning. Some participants mentioned the impact of living-history type experiences or trips to historical sites, while others reported being taught outside the classroom by members of their family.

Katy felt that a major source of her knowledge about the Crusades was gleaned from paintings that her grandfather had hung on his wall, and about which he would tell stories. She said, 'whenever I think of Crusade I think of that picture'. Chloe cited a visit to Winchester Castle where she saw 'the round table'. Elizabeth said that some of her associations with the Middle Ages came from a trip 'to Warwick Castle and they had like jousting on and, and, iron, like, makin'- I forgot-blacksmith! And stuff like that and I thought that was really, medieval, Middle Ages. So I think every time I see a castle I sort of see it with that kinda history'. Carin and Jane independently cited trips to the Royal Armouries as memorable.

It was not just leaving the classroom setting which was exciting; participants were enthusiastic about their memories of participating in living-history style lessons, especially those in which they would wear the clothes or eat the food of medieval people. Jane gave an animated recount of a when 'Our level went to Westminster Abbey and dressing up like a monk and being forced to like eat some weird porridge stuff' which she compared to 'sitting in the classroom being told something read from a textbook that just went straight [gesture over her head]'. Eleanor also recounted: 'We used to dress up and make our own costumes and... and make the old food that they used to have'. Jane and Elizabeth fondly recalled these experiences, where 'It was fun, we dressed up like Vikings', or 'We went to a castle. Dressed up'. The enthusiasm with which these participants recounted these experiences implies that their memorability may have had a marked impact on them. Furthermore, their focus upon the dress and food culture may have contributed in part to the understanding that medieval dress and food are among the most significant

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<sup>304</sup> Department of Education and Science and the Welsh Office, *National Curriculum History Working Group: Final Report* (London: HMSO, 1990), p. 177.

differences between the Middle Ages and the present day.

In summary, most participants did not trust the understanding of history that they received in primary school. They felt that history, medieval history in particular, was not treated in depth (although it is debatable whether this can be realistically expected of primary schooling). Most also recalled a sense of discomfort at the modularisation of history. On the other hand, they felt most enthusiastic when describing childhood experiences where they actively participated in their learning experience, whether by learning with family, visiting historical sites or museums or engaging in living-history style lessons. Despite their disregard for some aspects of their formal education, many of the paradigms for understanding the period learned in primary school seem to have remained with them into adulthood.

### Historical fiction novels

Another source for understanding of the Middle Ages cited by participants was historical fiction novels. Some had fond childhood memories of reading about the Middle Ages in *Ladybird* books and the *Horrible Histories* series.<sup>305</sup> Sean also cited the novel *Eclipse of the Crescent Moon* as something which gave him an insight into ‘the Islamic point of view’ of the Crusades (but this seems odd, considering that *Eclipse of the Crescent Moon* is neither told from the Islamic point of view nor set during the Crusades).<sup>306</sup>

Jess said the medievalist novels of Bernard Cornwell were a preferred source for knowledge about the Middle Ages: ‘I read historical romance books, like, I love them’. She said that they helped her learn about the ‘clothes’ and ‘how to run like a castle and like a household’. She went on to say ‘they go into like, relationships and stuff so you sort of remember that people

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<sup>305</sup> For the most recent reprints of *Horrible Histories* medieval range, see: Terry Deary, *The Measly Middle Ages*, reissue (London: Scholastic, 2007); Terry Deary, *The Smashing Saxons*, reissue (London: Scholastic, 2007); Terry Deary, *The Vicious Vikings*, reissue (London: Scholastic, 2007); Terry Deary, *The Stormin’ Normans*, reissue (London: Scholastic, 2007).

<sup>306</sup> Géza Gárdonyi, *Eclipse of the Crescent Moon*, trans. by George F. Cushing, 6th edn (Budapest: Corvina, 2002). The major historical events depicted in the book are the occupation of Buda in 1541 and the siege of Eger by the Ottoman Empire in 1552, well beyond the crusading period. Additionally, this novel does not portray events from the Ottoman (Islamic) perspective; but the Hungarian one, and the Hungarians are presented as nationalistic heroes.



are real people even in like the Middle Ages like it wasn't all just wars and boring-boring, you know?' Even though Cornwell's novels often feature war, Jess used these books to open a window into her specific historical interests.

### **Children's TV and films**

In addition to schooling and reading, participants said that their concepts of the Middle Ages originated in children's popular culture, citing television, film, and popular fiction as sources.

Erica felt that an early exposure to the Mel Brooks' lampoon comedy *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* established, for her, an expectation of the depiction of the Middle Ages which she still maintains: 'being little and watching *Robin Hood [Men in Tights]* with my parents [...] I've always associated medieval like films with just like tackiness, and just like a bit, a bit crappily made but it makes it more believable'. This experience had a profound effect on Erica; her judgement of subsequent films takes this film seen in childhood as a baseline. To her, the expectation of realism effects and historical authenticity are the opposite of the norm; she equates 'poorly made' with 'believable' in medieval film. This contributed, in part, to her (and others') negative estimation of the CGI-heavy *Beowulf* (discussed in chapter 6).

### **Disney's Medievalisms**

The November focus group also discussed the influence of children's popular culture, especially Disney films. They felt that Disney films taught them in a subtle way:

Catherine: I think by watching, like, when you're little, you get shown Disney films, so that's what sets an impression, and as you go through school you get taught more=

Emma: =Yeah like you learn, like you see it all and then you put it together that it=

Catherine: =You learn a bit about that=

Emma: =Is with medieval and all that, but you already have seen, have got a like picture of it in your head. Then you come to, like, school and it's sort of, like, goes together.

Elizabeth: Yeah.

- Emma: Like, you don't learn it deliberately, 's like, but you just like know it from what you seen and then what they tell ya.
- Jane: I suppose you go to school and they say, they have knights in the medieval times, without being told you immediately see a, a guy on a horse with the sword and the shield and without them having to say, this is what they wore.

Their expectations had been established by popular culture, then reinforced and validated by primary school – or perhaps vice-versa. In fact it is difficult to know an origin point as, especially to a child, a sense that school has more authority than a film may not be established.

Jane argued that to a child these films are recognisably medieval because they contain many of the icons of the Middle Ages. Here, she specified 'knights' but went on to cite 'queens', women in 'big dresses' and 'peasants'. Others added similar icons of the Middle Ages to this list: 'castles', 'long dresses', and 'princesses'.

The films which they discussed as being related to the Middle Ages are what they called 'traditional' Disney films. To them, this included *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, and *Beauty and the Beast*. These four films, they argued, were set in a similar fairy-tale version of the Middle Ages which Emma labelled 'traditional old'. Interestingly, these participants did not mention the three Disney films which *are* explicitly set in the Middle Ages: *Robin Hood*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *The Sword in the Stone*.<sup>307</sup>

It is easy to understand these 'traditional old' films as part of a discrete genre. However, the relationship between this micro-genre and the Middle Ages is subtle.<sup>308</sup> None of them is explicitly set during the Middle Ages, nor do they retell medieval narratives: they owe their narratives to the later adaptations of Charles Perrault's seventeenth-century folk tales by the

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<sup>307</sup> Reitherman, *Robin Hood*; Trousdale and Wise, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*; Reitherman, *The Sword in the Stone*.

<sup>308</sup> Despite the large corpus of academic work on Disney films, there are very few scholarly works that examine the medievalisms of Disney. For this, see: Maria Sachiko Cecire, 'Medievalism, Popular Culture and National Identity in Children's Fantasy Literature', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 9 (2009), 395-409. Also chapter 2 and 6 of Robin Allan, *Walt Disney and Europe: European Influences on the Animated Feature Films of Walt Disney* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

Grimm Brothers and Hans Christian Andersen.<sup>309</sup> Next, the costumes worn by the characters in these films are hybrids of different periods. For instance, the Princes of *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White* wear simplified versions of late fourteenth or fifteenth-century costume, each with hose, cloak and doublet.<sup>310</sup> The costumes worn by the Prince in *Sleeping Beauty* and by Snow White feature the puffed and slashed sleeve cap fashionable in early and mid sixteenth-century Germany. This was a result of the filmmakers' use of illustrated versions of Grimm's tales as a visual and narrative source and the German descent of many of the filmmakers.<sup>311</sup> On the other hand, *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast* are recognisably not medieval. The aristocratic men of *Cinderella* wear late nineteenth-century military formal dress, complete with epaulettes and trouser stripes.<sup>312</sup> The upper-class men of *Beauty and the Beast* wear the cutaway tailcoat, cravat, waistcoat and breeches combination reminiscent of late eighteenth-century European formalwear.<sup>313</sup> Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty* wears a dress that is a medieval dress imposed upon a later silhouette: off the shoulder and squeezed into the corseted-and-crinolined bell shape popular during the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>314</sup> The iconic dresses worn by Cinderella and Belle have a similar silhouette: early twentieth-century interpretations of mid nineteenth-century ballgowns, Victorianisms seamless amongst the medievalisms.

Despite the ambiguities, in some aspects the participants are correct in calling these films 'medieval', for each owes a debt to nineteenth-century medievalism. *Beauty and the Beast* begins with an introduction told through the medium of stained glass. Each of these 'traditional old' films depicts conservative gender roles (which owe more to early twentieth-century ideologies than

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<sup>309</sup> For modern scholarly editions, see: Charles Perrault, *The Complete Fairy Tales*, trans. by Christopher Betts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm All-New Third Edition*, trans. by Jack Zipes, 3rd edn (New York: Bantam, 2003); Hans Christian Andersen, *Hans Christian Andersen: The Complete Fairy Tales and Stories*, trans. by Erik Christian Haugaard (New York: Anchor, 1983).

<sup>310</sup> Clyde Geronimi, *Sleeping Beauty* (Walt Disney Studios, 1958); David Hand, *Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs* (Walt Disney Studios, 1937).

<sup>311</sup> Allan, pp. 16-18, 37-50.

<sup>312</sup> Clyde Geronimi, *Cinderella* (Walt Disney Studios, 1950).

<sup>313</sup> Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, *Beauty and the Beast* (Walt Disney Studios, 1992). Contini Mila, *Fashion: From Ancient Egypt to the Present Day*, ed. by James Laver (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1965), pp. 183-187.

<sup>314</sup> Francois Boucher, *A History of Costume in the West*, trans. by John Ross, New Enlarged edn. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), pp. 372-377.

medieval ones) which are commonly projected onto the Middle Ages in popular culture. This gender paradigm portrays females who, no matter how independent or able they may seem at the opening of the film, ultimately conform to heteronormative sexual relationships where they passively accept the heroic aristocrat male.<sup>315</sup> As Henry Giroux writes, 'All of the female characters in the films are ultimately subordinate to males and define their power and desire almost exclusively in terms of dominant male narratives'.<sup>316</sup> Though they may be judged positively based upon other traits, appropriate (read: white) feminine beauty is regarded as the paramount signifier of virtue, where, as Elizabeth Bell describes, 'Animated heroines were individuated in fair-skinned, fair-eyed, Anglo-Saxon features of Eurocentric loveliness, both conforming to and perfecting Hollywood's beauty boundaries'.<sup>317</sup>

Additionally, each prominently features hyper-medieval neo-gothic castles. Most notable amongst them is *Cinderella's* castle, reproduced in life-size in each of Disney's theme parks taken on as an emblem for Disney itself. It is an appropriate summation of Disney's brand of fairy-tale medievalism; they are mass-produced plastic castles built over the ruins of medieval culture. Appropriately enough, the castle in *Cinderella* was visually inspired by Neuschwanstein Castle in Bavaria which is itself a nineteenth-century neo-romantic architectural palimpsest, rebuilt over the flattened ruins of a medieval Teutonic castle. It was designed by Christian Jank, a theatre designer who took his inspiration for the castle from the operas of Richard Wagner, and was intended to be a retreat for King Ludwig II, where 'the myths and heroes from Wagner's music

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<sup>315</sup> There is a large corpus of commentary and analysis of Disney films, especially their construction of gender roles and their socialisation of children. See: Chapter 3 of Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan, *Deconstructing Disney* (London: Pluto Press, 1999). Also, Henry A. Giroux, *The Mouse That Roared* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001); Bell, 'Somatexts at the Disney Shop: Constructing the Pentimentos of Women's Animated Bodies', in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture*, ed. by Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas and Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 107-123; Amy M. Davis, *Good Girls and Wicked Witches: Women in Disney's Feature Animation* (John Libbey & Co Ltd, 2007).

<sup>316</sup> Giroux, pp. 98-99.

<sup>317</sup> *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture*, ed. by Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas and Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 110.

dramas would not only come to life for the duration of the music performance, but would always be present as images'.<sup>318</sup>

The June group also said that Disney films established a baseline for their knowledge of medieval material culture. In a discussion about what medieval Muslims would have looked like during the Crusades, the June group said:

Stephen: I have to say if I had any idea of how the Muslims would be dressed that has come from *Aladdin*. (laugh) That's, that's kind of basically my idea of, of what they'll be dressed like. So, I suppose that fairly matches up.

Moderator: Does everyone sort of agree with that, that *Aladdin* is a, is a source for at least your understanding of Islamic dress?

Justin: Yeah. Whether it's a good source or not [...] yeah.

These participants projected the dress they saw in *Aladdin*, which is not explicitly set in a specific country, but in a generically Middle-Eastern setting that retains some of the region's architectural (onion-domed palaces), landscape (palm trees and vast deserts) and cultural markers. Some specific references are given (notably the word 'Arabian' in the song *Arabian Nights* and the depiction of the sphinx), however no explicit temporal references are made which would set it in a place other than a vague time before guns and industrialisation. As a result, *Aladdin* is set in a fairy-tale 'adventure-time'<sup>319</sup> and 'adventure-space' similar to Disney's European fairy tales, except with different superficial cultural markers. Interestingly, there are no overt references to Islam present in the film, which means that Stephen and Justin's assertion that this film was a source for their idea of Muslim dress betrays the fact that they see all Middle-Easterners as Muslim. Immediately after the discussion of Muslim dress in *Aladdin*, these participants continued their discussion of how surprised they were by the depiction of the Muslims in *Kingdom of Heaven*:

Justin: I didn't expect the Islamic side to be that sophisticated. [...]

<sup>318</sup> Gottfried Knapp and Achim Bunz, *Neuschwanstein* (London: Edition Axel Menges, 1999), pp. 7, 9.

<sup>319</sup> M. M. Bakhtin developed the theoretical concept of 'adventure-time' and 'adventure-space' as a part of what he calls the 'chronotope': 'the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature'. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 85-158.

Stephen: for some reason maybe it's, you know, some, some gut feeling some gut, um thing that's been instilled in me from somewhere from some book from some film from some TV programme or whatever, I, I agree with you that you don't think of them as civilised.

The fact that the 'gut reaction' that medieval Muslims were not sophisticated or civilised was brought up in a conversation about *Aladdin* does not necessarily imply that *Aladdin* is the only, or even the most significant source for this idea. The blame should not be placed upon Disney alone. But a connection must exist between these two points, otherwise this would not have arisen spontaneously in a conversation about expectations generated, in part, by *Aladdin*.

This gives some credence to those within the Arab community who have taken offence at the film's depiction of Middle-Eastern culture. For example, in 2007 the Islamic Human Rights Commission published a study which argued that the images of Arabs in *Aladdin* are offensive. They took issue with the use of the word 'barbaric' in the lyric of the opening song 'Arabian Nights': 'Oh I come from a land / from a faraway place / Where the caravan camels roam. / Where they cut off your ear / if they don't like your face / It's barbaric, but hey, it's home!'<sup>320</sup> Under pressure from the Arab community at the time of its release, Disney changed some of the lyrics for the home-video. But, as the Islamic Human Rights commission reports, 'It did however retain the line containing the word barbaric. The impression that this adjective leaves on the audience can be nothing but negative and derogatory'.<sup>321</sup> This report also criticises subtler negative images of Arabs:

most of the Arab dwellers of 'Agrabah' are shown as brutal, bumbling palace guards chasing Aladdin or maidens dressed in veils, street vendors or merchants selling their goods on market stalls. In contrast to the Arabs who are ruthless caricatures, Aladdin, Princess Jasmine and the Sultan are Anglicised (or Americanised to be precise) heroes of the film. They have American accents whilst the rest of the cast have exaggerated and

<sup>320</sup> Ron Clements and John Musker, *Aladdin* (Walt Disney Studios, 1992).

<sup>321</sup> Saied R. Ameli and others, *The British Media and Muslim Representation: The Ideology of Demonisation* (Wembley: Islamic Human Rights Commission, 2007), p. 47. For more on American Arab reactions to *Aladdin* at the time of its release, see: Marvin Wingfield and Bushra Karaman, 'Arab Stereotypes and American Educators', in *Beyond Heroes and Holidays: A Practical Guide to K-12 Anti-Racist, Multicultural Education and Staff Development*, ed. by Enid Lee, Deborah Menkart and Margo Okazawa-Rey, 1st edn (Network of Educators on the Americas, 1998), pp. 132-136 (pp. 132-133).

ridiculous Arab accents. The genie even abbreviates Aladdin's name to 'Al' creating a more likeable character that the audience can relate to. Rather than portray the Arab culture and Islamic religion in a positive or neutral light, the producers associate it with harsh punishments [...] oppressive practices [...] and, uncivilized or inferior cultural identifiers attributed to Islam (undeveloped market places, veiled women, harem maidens, villains, onion shaped domes, minarets, treasures, magic carpets, gold).<sup>322</sup>

*Aladdin* was released into the theatres in 1992. The participants in my study, being between eighteen and twenty six would have been under six years of age at the time. This means, though it is unlikely that most would have seen it in the cinema, they likely were shown it on VHS or DVD at a very early age. Additionally, with the infinite replayability of VHS and DVD, and with children's desire for repetition of the familiar, it is probable they saw it many times. As a result, it is entirely possible that many of the images criticised by the Islamic Human Rights Commission eventually helped to form the 'gut reaction' against Islam expressed by Stephen and Justin. This point requires further study, but it does indicate that the portrayal of other cultures in Disney films can set an unconscious standard which seems hard to uproot even by cognitive dissonance.

The most provocative point here is that the depiction of cultures and peoples in children's films, like the ones mentioned above, may not just have a temporary impact upon the perceptions of the children who watch them that they ultimately 'grow out of', but that they may establish expectations, 'gut reactions' or cultural stereotypes that remain influential in their adult lives. A further factor here is that, due to the pervasive amount of medieval imagery within popular culture, children are exposed to images of the Middle Ages at an age before they are able to differentiate readily between fantasy and reality. As adolescent cognitive psychologists W. George Scarlett and Dennie Wolf explain, 'transition from the pretence of symbolic play to that of storytelling occurring between the ages of three and five', in other words, before the age of five, children make little cognitive distinction between story and reality.<sup>323</sup> As children are exposed to the period through children's popular culture, they become accustomed to seeing elements of the

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<sup>322</sup> Ameli and others, pp. 47-48.

<sup>323</sup> W. George Scarlett and Dennie Wolf, 'When It's Only Make-Believe: The Construction of a Boundary Between Fantasy and Reality in Storytelling', *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 1979 (1979), 29-40.

fantastical Middle Ages (like wizards and dragons) alongside elements of the historical Middle Ages (such as knights and castles). As they age, these fantastical elements eventually become understood as not existing in reality (or having existed in history), but the sense that these fantastical creatures are located within the context of the Middle Ages remains. In short, though they become understood to be not real, they remain understood to be medieval.

### **Playing in the Middle Ages: Video games**

Many male participants cited video games as sources of knowledge. The video game industry has grown exponentially over its past thirty years of existence to the point where earnings on a single title can rival that of the biggest Hollywood blockbusters.<sup>324</sup> Dan, Mark, John and Jake from the May group all referred to medieval-themed computer strategy games as a trusted source of information. Three titles were mentioned: *Medieval: Total War*, *Age of Empires*, and *Sid Meier's Civilization 4*.<sup>325</sup>

Jake said a source of his knowledge about the Crusades was: 'Age of Empires games and one of the campaigns, he's [Saladin] in one of the campaigns on that, so that's where I get that from'. When asked what the word 'medieval' meant to him, Dan responded. "'Medieval', I thought a lot more in terms of war because I base my knowledge on a game that's about warfare [...] *Medieval: Total War*. So medieval, I knew a lot of stuff about how they killed people'. The impact of this game upon his idea of the medieval is clear when examining Dan's stream-of-consciousness exercise (Figure 5, below). Each of the elements he reported for 'medieval' are elements of the game. Even number 3, which describes Roman-Era Germanic groups are playable factions in *Rome: Total War*.

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<sup>324</sup> Claudine Beaumont, 'Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2: Why Video Games Can't Be Ignored', *The Telegraph*, 13 November 2009, section Technology <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/video-games/6562828/Call-Of-Duty-Modern-Warfare-2-why-video-games-cant-be-ignored.html>> [accessed 22 March 2010].

<sup>325</sup> *Age of Empires 2: Age of Kings* (Microsoft, 2001); *Medieval II: Total War* (Creative Assembly, 2008); *Sid Meier's Civilization IV* (2K Games, 2005).



1	Total War!
2	Longbows
3	Huns / Vandals / Goths
4	Holy Roman empire
5	Saxons
6	Cavalry
7	Yeomen
8	Fortresses/citadels
9	Post-Roman
10	Crusades
11	Papist Europe
12	Early gunpowder
13	Khan!
14	Low pop's [populations]

**Figure 5: Dan's Stream of Consciousness Exercise for 'Medieval'**

Mark trusted the historical information presented by his preferred game: 'I suppose *Civiliz- Sid Meier's Civilization 4* would have been a source because that is, that also has a very large amount of information in it and I can't help but think that they'd probably gone and done their homework probably before they spend that much effort on anything'. So to him, the overall effort put into the game by the designers implies that the history in it is trustworthy. He **also** used the video game as an underpinning for his cynical view of humanity: 'I look outside and I think has much changed really? No, we've just worked out better ways to chop each other to bits. But maybe that's just because I play a lot of *Civilization*'. Though Mark may have been making a joke, the underlying idea that history is defined by military progress coincides neatly with the version of history presented by these war games.

### **TV and films for Adults**

Participants reported that their learning from popular culture did not stop at childhood. After the age of five a child learns the difference between story and reality. However, older viewers of visual media can choose selectively to willingly suspend their disbelief (the term coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and discussed in chapter 3). Even before the film screenings, many participants

cited films and TV programmes which they had watched as adults as sources for their knowledge of the Middle Ages. The films and TV programmes included *Monty Python and the Quest for the Holy Grail*, *A Knight's Tale*, *Shrek*, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* and the BBC TV series *Merlin*. A commonality between all these films and TV programmes is that none of them purport to depict true events; none of them is historical in the strict sense. All are either depictions of myths, legends or fairy tales or, in the case of *Shrek*, *Men in Tights* and *Monty Python*, comedic subversions of these depictions. Sometimes, participants would simply cite these films as a source for their knowledge (as in Stephen's, 'To be honest my source for most of this is *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*'), or would express being a fan of the film (or, in the case of *A Knight's Tale*, a fan of the star in the leading role) and volunteer no more information. On other occasions, the participant actively related the film to their acquisition of knowledge about the Middle Ages.

Participants often felt that what made these films recognisably medieval was the inclusion of a variety of icons of the period, rather than their depiction of medieval history. When asked 'was there anything about them [the films they identified as medieval] that was particularly medieval', the November group listed: 'The clothing in *Shrek*', 'the horses', 'the set in *Merlin*', 'castles', the 'dragon', 'noblemen and peasants', 'queens, kings' and a 'divide between rich and poor'. These icons are extremely similar to those elements reported in the stream-of-consciousness exercises. Therefore if a programme were to include a number of these elements, no matter how anachronistic other elements of the plot were, it is possible some viewers would consider it medieval on this basis alone.

On the other hand, a few were more critical in their approach. Jane criticised the BBC TV series *Merlin* for what she felt was a historically inaccurate plot device. In it, she believes the filmmakers applied its audience's ideals of egalitarianism and democracy anachronistically to the story of Arthur, saying:

[...] history's deliberately being taken out of it. 's like, in the last episode, King Arthur went to go and help Merlin defeat somebody ravaging his village. [...]But, without, it was against

his father's permission, who was the king, and like he went and was asleep on the floor next to his servant and with all the poor people. I don't think, that, that really would have happened because as the prince he just wouldn't have done that and I don't think he'd have gone against the king's wishes for a servant. [...] the historian watching it would be like, it's not right, like they've deliberately twisted it to, for people watching it who aren't historians, like the majority of people to just kind of enjoy it.

Jane balked at what she perceived to be pandering on the part of the creators to 'people watching it who aren't historians' in favour of a 'nice story'. To her, the legend of Arthur is explicitly medieval, and as such even a modern retelling of the story must retain the socio-cultural expectations she has of the period—even if the series features fantastical elements.

### **Forgetting: The Last Crusade**

Participants also cited three films as their source material for their understandings of the Crusades: *Kingdom of Heaven*, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Interestingly, some of the participants misremembered 'the last crusade' as a historical event rather than the title of a film. Jess included it on her stream of consciousness sheet and later explained: 'the last crusade, I don't know what the first one was or anything but I just wrote the last crusade'. Justin associated the word crusade with a quest to recover 'the holy grail' and 'religious artefacts, almost like the shroud of Turin' because of its association with 'the last crusade'. Participants remembered the sign 'The Last Crusade' but forgot that it signified the Indiana Jones film. However, the association with 'crusade' remained. These associations gain meaning only because their source was forgotten; as a result, the fact that the association was invalid was also forgotten.

This is a prime example of one of the most powerful processes observed in this study: forgetting. When the source of knowledge is forgotten, its validity can no longer be interrogated. Facts can be misremembered, knowledge that is only used infrequently can slip. Furthermore, as Stephen and Sean rightly asserted (p. 131), most of our sources of knowledge have been forgotten. This promotes popular culture as a source of knowledge that is just as valid as anything

derived from academic learning; once the source is forgotten, who can tell the difference?

### **Arguing semantics: The differences between ‘Middle Ages’ and ‘medieval’**

One of the consistent questions posed to participants was what their definition of the words ‘Middle Ages’ and ‘medieval’ were, and whether there were any significant differences between the two. The following section examines the technical definitions for these words and any apparent subtleties between them, and compares them to the collective definitions which the participants invented.

#### **Technical definitions**

In the *Oxford English Dictionary (2nd Edition)*, the adjective ‘medieval’ has many definitions. Those which are not considered obsolete are: ‘1. Of or relating to a period of time intervening *between* (periods designated as) *ancient and modern*; *spec.* of, relating to, or characteristic of the Middle Ages.’, ‘3. *colloq.* Exhibiting the severity or illiberality ascribed to a former age; *cruel, barbarous.*’, and ‘3a. *U.S.* *to get medieval*: to use violence or extreme measures *on*, to become aggressive.’<sup>326</sup>

The final of these is cited as originating in the 1994 Quentin Tarantino film, *Pulp Fiction*, in the famous quote that stands at the head of this thesis.<sup>327</sup>

The fact that the word ‘medieval’ is an adjective lends itself more naturally (than the longer ‘of the Middle Ages’) to describe things which are not self-evidently from the period. Thus ‘medieval’ can be used to describe objects, concepts or actions which have an intangible relation to the popular image of the period rather than to the period itself, like the oft-used ‘medieval torture’ or ‘medieval plumbing’. It hardly matters that torture techniques became more sophisticated and widely-used during the Early Modern period, or that some aspects of medieval

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<sup>326</sup> ‘Medieval, Adj. and N.’, in *OED Online*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) <[http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00304577?single=1&query\\_type=word&queryword=medieval](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00304577?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=medieval)> [accessed 30 March 2010].

<sup>327</sup> Tarantino, *Pulp Fiction*.

plumbing were actually quite good.<sup>328</sup> The Middle Ages is the icon for pre-modern barbarity, and so the association remains. It is in this way that the *OED*'s third definition of the word (above) came into being, and it is from this idea that the *Pulp Fiction* usage of the word became popular parlance.

By contrast, the entry for 'Middle Ages' is much simpler: 'the Middle Ages *n.* (also now *rare* the Middle Age); The period in European history between ancient and modern times, now usually taken as extending from the fall of the Roman Empire in the West (c500) to the fall of Constantinople (1453) or the beginning of the Renaissance (fourteenth cent.); the medieval period; *esp.* the later part of this period, after 1000'.<sup>329</sup> 'Middle Ages' is a compound noun, which makes it far less malleable than its adjectival cousin and as a result is often used only to refer to the period of history.

Similar to the *OED*, the participants in this study had distinct, albeit intersecting, understandings of these terms. Some had difficulty seeing any distinction between them. When first asked to write a word-association sheet for the term 'Middle Ages' when she had already completed one for 'medieval', Emma hesitated: 'I don't really know the difference'. Sean, in the June group, also had difficulties: 'I didn't really find any sort of difference between medieval and Middle Ages'. Most of the other participants did not have the same difficulties evinced by Emma and Sean. They collectively constructed a pair of definitions which were similar in many ways. However each had subtle differences and evoked a different image of the period. This was reflected both in what they wrote for the word association exercises and during the ensuing discussion.

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<sup>328</sup> For medieval plumbing, see: Paul B. Newman, *Daily Life in the Middle Ages* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), pp. 139-150. For Early Modern torture, see: Julius R Ruff, *Violence in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 92-100; Edward Peters, *Torture* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), pp. 74-102.

<sup>329</sup> 'Middle Age, N. and Adj.', in *OED Online*, 2010th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press) <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00309084?>> [accessed 30 March 2010].

### **Separating ‘Middle Ages’ and ‘medieval’: History and legend**

For the participants, the primary distinction between ‘medieval’ and ‘Middle Ages’ rested along the line between fantasy and history. Almost all participants described the term ‘Middle Ages’ as referring to a historical period, whereas ‘medieval’ referred to fantasy and legend. John said ‘I feel like medieval refers to something which is more, uh, existing today. So more like a retrospective view. And it also links to a bit more sort of fantasy, which people built up to a more fantasy medieval stuff. But Middle Ages to me is a much more official term given to a period, the actual period of time’. John’s observation is astute, and relates closely to the observations about the adjectival use of the term ‘medieval’ above, which can impart a retrospective, nostalgic sense. Some other examples of this include, ‘medieval I associate legends rather than true history’, and ‘Middle Ages I’ve thought more along the lines of the Royal Armouries and like, history stuff whereas, like, medieval ones I’ve thought of like, fairy tales and legends and King Arthur’. This broad association of ‘medieval’ with fantasy and ‘Middle Ages’ with history had a number of resulting affects upon the participants interpretation of these terms.

Firstly, as discussed above, (p. 126) many participants identified ‘medieval’ as limited to Britain whereas ‘Middle Ages’ was a term that could apply more widely geographically. They often did this based on a sense that being historical, ‘Middle Ages’ was more geographically diverse, whereas they were only familiar with British legends that were associated with the word ‘medieval’.

Participants also had different moral judgements about the two terms. They commonly described the Middle Ages as being worse than medieval. Middle Ages, to them, carried connotations of poverty, filth, barbarism and oppression. Chloe called the Middle Ages ‘more primitive’ than ‘medieval’. When describing their responses to ‘Middle Ages’, Stephen and Justin said:

Stephen: Well, at the top we have disease, basically. We just associate it with disease, general unpleasantness. And then we’ve got unrest and punishment underneath that, so pretty usual.

Justin: Yeah, medieval is essentially more focussed on the glamorous type things where this [Middle Ages] is more on the streets and it being kind of horrible and mangy basically.

Other responses in this vein include: 'For Middle Ages we had [...] all the nasty kind of things, battles, that kind of stuff'; 'I thought the Middle Ages, I think of dirtier, smellier people than medieval'; 'Middle Ages I just thought was really backwards and dirty' and 'with Middle Ages I put down like mud and dirt first'.

By contrast, 'medieval' had more romanticised connotations. Jess though medieval referred to 'it's all sort of party-ish and like they're having feasts and has got decent clothes'. For medieval, Elizabeth, Emma and Catherine had an animated exchange about costume:

Catherine: [When I think of medieval costume  
 Emma: 'Medieval' yeah.]  
 Catherine: Is like the big flowing dresses of the rich people and the big headdresses=  
 Elizabeth: =But with 'the Middle Ages' I put down like mud and dirt first.

Other examples include: 'for 'medieval' we had more, like, romanticised, like monsters and banquets, fighting, jousting, that kind of area', 'it was all about like, knights and castles and stuff', and 'medieval was more like, grand'. This sense that many of the participants shared directly contrasts with the *OED*'s definition which ascribes barbarity and backwardness to 'medieval', both in the third definition and the *Pulp Fiction* definition.

In summary, participants felt that the words 'Middle Ages' evoked an image of barbarism, dirt, poverty and disease. On the other hand, 'medieval' had more romantic connotations of aristocratic adventure, grand feasts and lavish costume, perhaps due its association with legends and fantasy. Though contradictory, both exist simultaneously.

### **The two faces of the Middle Ages**

Some academics have described this dual-image of the Middle Ages; it is a common phenomenon in medievalism. However a review of the literature has found no instances in which

academics ascribe each of these ‘faces’ of the Middle Ages to the two terms commonly used to describe the period. Both Umberto Eco and David Williams identified these two images (of the jolly or dark Middle Ages) in their taxonomies of the popular medievalisms, though they describe their ideas somewhat differently than the participants did. The above-described visions are retrospective views, where the past is either seen as something to be lionised and which inspires a desire to return to it, or a backward ancestor from which modernity should recoil, and which is regarded with disdain.

### **The dark, unpleasant Middle Ages**

Eco describes one of his ‘ten little Middle Ages’ as:

The Middle Ages as a *barbaric* age, a land of elementary and outlaw feelings [...] they are also the Middle Ages of early Bergman. The same elementary passions could exist equally on the Phoenician coasts or in the desert of Gilgamesh. These ages are Dark par excellence [...] With only a slight distortion, one is asked to celebrate, on this earth of virile, brute force, the glories of a new Aryanism. It is a shaggy medievalism, and the shaggier its heroes, the more profoundly ideological its superficial naïveté.<sup>330</sup>

This description corresponds roughly to the second item in Williams’ taxonomy of popular images of the period: ‘Whatever the purported date, these Ages are dark, dirty, violent, politically unstable or threatening. Here are *The War Lord*, *Conan the Barbarian*, and Lang’s Nibelungs and Huns. These are the ages of Bergman, and of Richard Fleischer’s *Vikings* despite the hearty jollity of its heroic violence.’<sup>331</sup>

The participants did not exclusively limit this vision of the Middle Ages to the Early Middle Ages. They also focused upon different aspects of the period than these commentators. Many of the participants felt that the term ‘Middle Ages’ specifically referred to a time period that they viewed as unpleasant. The participants focused specifically on a few specific key aspects of this. To

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<sup>330</sup> Umberto Eco, ‘Dreaming of the Middle Ages’, in *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*, trans. by William Weaver (London: Picador, 1987), pp. 61-73 (p. 68).

<sup>331</sup> David Williams, 1-32 (p. 10).



them, the Middle Ages were a time rife with war, violence, poverty and social inequity; they were unclean, they were unhealthy, and the governments were autocratic and oppressive.

One of the first things that many participants ascribed to the Middle Ages was warfare. However, though they cited warfare and violence as important in terms of their understandings, and also easily described icons of warfare in the Middle Ages (swords, castles, etc), they only very rarely described warfare in the Middle Ages in any detail. They seemed to have an idea that warfare was important to the Middle Ages and knew much of the kit involved, but had little concept of what medieval warfare actually entailed. Katy gave a rare exception; to her the salient difference between modern and medieval war is 'it was much more about manpower and horses rather than the actual science and bombs that they have now'. Though she has a valid point (as the mechanisation of warfare has led to a less personal, more technological approach to battle), to understand medieval warfare as unscientific is not correct either. Katy's statement may spring from the larger idea that the Middle Ages were unscientific or ignorant.

When confronted with 'Middle Ages', participants also thought of a large social divide between the landed rich and the rural poor. John listed all the types of people he thought of living in the Middle Ages as comprising 'actual people involved, like all the kings and queens, em, knights, jesters, and blacksmiths and other poor lives'. To John, the Middle Ages not only lacks a middle class but lacks any sort of social stratification outside the monarchy and military aristocracy at the apex and blacksmiths and 'other poor lives' at the bottom. Some participants felt that this social system was inherently unfair or oppressive, and that the monarchy regularly abused their power. For example, Stephen defined a medieval king glibly as: 'a man in a palace who has people killed on a whim'. Jane felt that, to her, the Middle Ages bore 'the idea of, like having absolute monarchy rule, that, like whatever the king or queen says goes and nobody questions it'. She distinguished this from any non-royal governing body, which to her would only fit in more recent history: 'if you had a film where it was talking about the government or, some sort of ruling [...] body who wasn't the king or queen you wouldn't think of it as sort of, going back

to medieval times, you'd think of it as fairly recent history'. To her, thinking of a government during the period without monarchy is anathema; representative government is a feature of modernity. Stephen and Justin also saw the Middle Ages as having this social paradigm in the following exchange:

- Stephen: And also I think you when you think Middle Ages you kind of think peasants and having, having kind of a lower class type thing, and then having a higher class which is a monarchy, you know knights and that kind of thing=  
 Justin: =we've probably got more down the, the social conditions for the peasants for the peasants than thinking about the social conditions for the knights and the kings and barons and what have you. Um, for some reason when I think of the Middle Ages I think of the streets, you know of somewhere which is, you know, dirty and you've got peasants running around in markets and things like that.

For Stephen and Justin, the world of the 'Middle Ages' evokes a vivid image of rural poverty. Participants routinely identified the Middle Ages with the rural poor (who they referred to as 'peasants' or 'serfs') more than the urban poor or even the rich. Further examples of this include, '[I] think of the agricultural kind of life [...] there's no indu- like, industry's a recent thing so, like think about the hierarchy in terms of that. The peasants and landown- like peasant and landowner kind of balance', and also 'I almost put down sort of farming and self-sufficiency, but I checked myself 'cause I thought "no" because it was the peasants did do all the work'.

### **Dirt and disease**

The participants felt that the rampant poverty of the period resulted in uncleanliness and ill-health. Disease was the most frequent response to the 'Middle Ages' stream of consciousness exercise, with over half of participants citing it (see Figure 3 and 4, p. 121). Jess said: 'when I thought the Middle Ages, I think of dirtier, smellier people than in medieval, so I sort of wrote serfs down, and like poor people, and farmers which I didn't write down for medieval'. This focus on the smelliness of the Middle Ages is common in popular interpretations of the Middle Ages. It has become generally accepted that medieval people (unlike their Roman predecessors) did not

bathe regularly nor did they have internal plumbing. The Jorvik Viking Centre, in York, UK, plays upon this common idea of the Middle Ages as a ‘smelly’ place by featuring in its animatronic Viking village a recreated ‘tenth-century urban odour’.<sup>332</sup>

As a result of so much not-bathing and resultant stinking, the participants felt that disease was rife and life expectancy low. One of the categories John and Jess invented for their definition of ‘Middle Ages’ was hygiene, or its lack: ‘a low life expectancy, as a result of the, the, hygiene and germs’. Mark was sarcastic in his view of medieval medical practice:

high infant mortality, [...] no painkillers and antibiotics which were two real crippers of middle-aged, middle-aged medicine. And, I just had dirt down so I had to get a bit of dirt before hygiene because they hadn’t discovered the wonders of washing your hands before delivering a baby.

Though Mark is correct that antibiotics did not exist, he is incorrect that there were no painkillers and in his implication that there were no effective medicines. Though a scientific understanding of medicine and physiology (as understood today) was absent, this does not mean that the Middle Ages lacked medicine or hygiene entirely.<sup>333</sup> Furthermore, his seeming implication that medieval people were intellectually inferior is a common attitude. Faye Marie Gets argues against this way of looking at the past: ‘The ways of our early ancestors may seem foolish to us: herbalism, philosophical advice, magic, or so called folk-remedies—all of which seem to be based upon luck, superstition or error. But no person living in a prescientific culture could be expected to count scientific medicine among his or her many healing choices’.<sup>334</sup>

This smug technological superiority over the Middle Ages is a common trope of stories in time travel stories to the Middle Ages. Time-travellers in this kind of fiction often smugly assert their technological superiority over medieval ignorance. This began with Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, where the modern man brings technology to the past,

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<sup>332</sup> David Musgrove, ‘Jorvik Viking Centre, York’, *BBC History Magazine Online*

<<http://www.bbchistorymagazine.com/visit/jorvik-viking-centre-york>> [accessed 30 March 2010].

<sup>333</sup> For a recent overview of medieval medical theory and practice: *Medieval Medicine: A Reader*, ed. by Faith Wallis, Readings in Medieval Civilizations and Cultures, XV (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

<sup>334</sup> Faye Marie Getz, *Medicine in the English Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. xi. See also: Charles H. Talbot, *Medicine in Medieval England* (London: Oldbourne, 1967).

with both wondrous and disastrous results.<sup>335</sup> The protagonist Ash in the film *Army of Darkness* does this often, especially when explaining the superiority of his shotgun over their 'primitive' weapons, 'Alright you primitive screwheads, listen up! You see this? This... is my boomstick!'<sup>336</sup> The time-traveller protagonists in Michael Crichton's *Timeline* fall victim to medieval barbarity, and only survive due to their technological ingenuity.<sup>337</sup> This way of thinking about the past privileges the present and the future. It relies strongly upon the idea of progress: the world is progressing towards from bad to good, from primitivism to technological superiority, through time. Therefore a period of history as far-removed as the Middle Ages must be far worse than the present day.

The participants often felt that they are in a privileged position in time where they can look back with disdain upon their ignorant, violent, dirty, smelly, and unhygienic medieval ancestors. The precarious position of this disdainful attitude towards historical technology and culture is playfully exposed in the film *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home*. When starship medical officer Dr. McCoy encounters a kidney dialysis machine when stranded in the 1980s, he muses: 'What is this, the Dark Ages?'<sup>338</sup> Perhaps soon we will all be considered medieval.

### **The romantic-legendary medieval: Here be dragons**

Williams and Eco also address the image that participants described as 'medieval': that of a location for romantic adventure and opulence, the location of Robin Hood, Camelot and Disney medievalisms. Eco does not have a ready category for this in his taxonomy of 'ten little Middle Ages'. Williams describes this as 'These Middle Ages are bright, clean, noble, sporting and merry. This is Hollywood and often Sherwood. It is Douglas Fairbanks and Robert Taylor. Despite the outlaws, the politics are of the establishment.'<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Oxford World Classics Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>336</sup> Raimi.

<sup>337</sup> Michael Crichton, *Timeline* (New York: Random House, 2000).

<sup>338</sup> Nimoy.

<sup>339</sup> David Williams, 1-32 (p. 10).

When discussing the ideas and images evoked by the word ‘medieval’, many participants reported that they had a sense of the ‘medieval’ as being connected with myth, legend and fantasy. Jane made the distinction clear: ‘medieval ones I’ve thought of like, fairy tales and legends like King Arthur and along that route.’ To Elizabeth, ‘medieval’ evoked associations with a time period she struggled to describe as ‘legendary-old’. This ‘legendary-old’ evoked not just myth and legend but a specific genre of fairy-tale myth and legend: one containing knights, wizards, dragons, witches, kings and queens. However, they cited only a few specific examples. When asked what sort of legends fit within this category, Jane listed, ‘King Arthur and Merlin, Chaucer, Heath Ledger’.<sup>340</sup> Other legends or legendary figures mentioned by that group included ‘knights’ ‘Robin Hood’ and ‘Shrek’.

Some participants felt that the fantasy genre of literature and films was inherently medieval. Justin said ‘I suppose I associate the fantasy genre with the Middle Ages’. Some felt that many of the stock figures and characters used in that genre were inherently medieval. Justin had difficulty reconciling the cognitive dissonance of his intuitive association of fantasy characters with a historical period: ‘things I knew didn’t exist but for some reason the words [Middle Ages] kind of bring them up’. He and Stephen struggled to explain the differences between fantasy and medieval:

- Stephen: We didn’t think Robin Hood but I think sometimes I thought maybe kind of, you know, ‘cause... almost mythology but not. Kind of, things like you know, wizards and things which you know didn’t exist, but I do think that sometimes when those words like, ‘cause it’s=
- Justin: =It’s the Lord of the Rings thing has a kind of, Middle Ages feel a bit, it kind of associates=
- Stephen: =you know, Yeah, I mean. To be honest my source for most of this is Monty Python and the Holy Grail.

Stephen felt uncomfortable when revealing that many of his primary sources for his understanding of the Middle Ages are, in fact, fantasies or legends. His familiarity with this genre

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<sup>340</sup> The last two—one a contemporary actor and one a historical author, are likely mentioned in this list because of their presence in *A Knight’s Tale*. Jane obviously felt this film fit in with this category of myth and legend. It was a particular favourite of many in the November group.

of popular culture may have, in part, instilled in him a natural association between the Middle Ages and figures of legend and fantasy. Some other participants also felt that this association was manufactured by their experience with popular culture. For example, John said 'I think all these associations [of monsters with the medieval], like every time we've said it, we've just said "you can't really imagine it", but I think that's just be, come from all different films and programs that we've seen in our lifetime. It's just what you, all the associations that you make with those time periods. I don't see there to be any reason why, really'. Sean specifically blamed the association on films: 'I think films often do that as well, don't they. [...] If it's not a witch of some sort it's a wizard or a dragon or something'. These participants make explicit their understanding that their ideas of the medieval has been influenced by the popular culture that they consume, by forging an association between the Middle Ages and icons of fantasy.

Some felt that the fantastical icons of the legendary medieval would seem out of place in another time period. For example, Jess felt 'you can't just picture them [monsters] strolling down the street in like Roman togas. If you're gonna put them in a film, this is the sort of time period, that sort of, when no one really knows what was going on [...] you can't imagine Henry the Eighth's court there being a dragon [...] with the French revolution you can't just imagine a dragon'. To Jess, the medieval period is the appropriate place for monsters to exist because of her perception that 'no one really knows what was going on', as compared to the Roman, Tudor or French Revolutionary periods. John agreed but went further, 'I can't imagine them [monsters] in Roman times, but that might be because there's so much more information about Romans [...] and they're pretty, they're better, better-off civilisation, more developed, so you can't really just put the two together'.

Thus it is not only the period's distance from the present which makes it a viable location for fantasy, but also the perception that there is little historical knowledge about it and its lack of 'development'. An idea which was often repeated in the groups is that little about the Middle Ages is known by historians. While it is the case that fewer written records survive from the early

Middle Ages than for later periods, these students certainly have not been taught all there is to know about the period. However, like early modern cartographers, they feel comfortable with monsters being drawn into the blank spaces of their historical consciousness.

### **'Medieval' warfare**

Finally, participants felt that warfare and violence were important for their perception of the word 'medieval', however this commonly took a different shape than the type of warfare evoked by 'Middle Ages'. Much of the discussion on specifically 'medieval' warfare revolved around knights and the idea of knighthood, and took a romanticised tone. Jess felt that her impression of medieval knighthood had been constructed by her experience watching re-enactment jousting and films: 'I don't tend to think of actual knights when I think of knights I think of knights in jousts doing the faux battlin' like in, you know like village fetes but they have all those weird jousting competitions and stuff, yeah like in *A Knight's Tale*'. Many agreed, and viewed knights as showmen in the lists of contemporary heritage sites, rather than soldiers on the battlefields of history.

Four people spontaneously used the common phrase 'knights in shining armour' in discussion of the period. This incidentally shows how often fairy-tale language is applied to history. Laura made clear the division between fairy-tale and modern knighthood: 'I agree that I would just think of the stereotypical shining armour saving a princess thing but I think there are lots of different kinds of knights, like, if I thought of a knight in the modern day I'd think of a Sir, who doesn't really even necessarily have to be, you know, a fighter'. Though Laura acknowledges that the idea of knighthood evokes images of romantic medieval knights saving princesses, knighthood has taken on a different meaning within a modern British context. That meaning has been stripped of its martial heroic implications and replaced with a generic image of a successful person within society.

### **Summary: ‘medieval’ and ‘Middle Ages’, light and dark**

In summary, many participants felt that the word ‘medieval’ bore implications of fantasy, legend and fairy tale. As a result, the word ‘medieval’ specifically had connotations of opulence and adventure. Many felt that the fantasy genre of literature or visual media is set in something recognisably medieval, with medieval icons and settings. Additionally, many felt that the monsters and magic related to this sort of literature is linked to the medieval historical context more than any other. Violence within this vision of the medieval world is tamed; it is limited to the context of the jousting list of the re-enactor or the noble quest of the storybook knight. This bright, cheery vision of the medieval is distinctly different from what one might expect from the way in which the adjective is often applied in the media as a predecessor to ‘torture’ or ‘violence’. The *Pulp Fiction* gritty and barbaric vision of the period was encapsulated far more often in the words ‘Middle Ages’ than in ‘medieval’.

### **Perceptions of medieval religion and crusade**

Very few participants spontaneously discussed medieval religion until they watched *Kingdom of Heaven* on the second day. The notable exceptions to this were those few participants who held pointed views about medieval religion which seemed based upon their own religious affiliations. For example, Mark had a particular focus on religious issues with regards to the Middle Ages. As a self-described ‘charismatic Baptist’, Mark found little to redeem medieval religion.<sup>341</sup> For their stream of consciousness exercises, both he and Dan focused on religion: ‘papists, pre-Reformation, we’ve got the Crusades, we’ve got witch burning again, schisms, but we’ve also got things like cathedrals [...] monks and nuns’. He and Dan also used anti-Catholic language to refer to medieval religion, particularly the term ‘papist’. To Mark, the most significant differences between the Middle Ages and the present day were the reforms of Martin Luther. Mark claimed that ‘Middle Ages sort of ended [in] Luther’s era, Reformations when more, there was a lot more

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<sup>341</sup> Charismatic Baptists are a neo-Pentecostal sect of Baptists who believe that miracles, glossolalia and prophecy can be and are experienced in the modern day.



free-thinking [...] we've kind of moved on to the Enlightenment age where science was, science was allowed to flourish'. He also referred to the concept of 'freedom of thought' as something lacking in the Middle Ages. These statements were intended to put himself in opposition to the Middle Ages, both as a Protestant and also as a scientifically-minded mathematics student. To him, the rift between medieval and modern is a religious, intellectual and scientific one; the reforms of Luther allowed for 'free-thinking' which resulted in the Enlightenment. To him, medieval culture was defined primarily by its 'backwards' religion and resultant intellectual culture. Though other participants did not express Mark's views in the discussion prior to the films, after having seen the *Kingdom of Heaven*, many articulated similar views. This will be discussed further in chapter 6 and 7.

#### **How do participants describe their understanding of crusade?**

The Crusades were the focus of the second meeting of the spring groups as a way of gauging their reactions to *Kingdom of Heaven*. Like 'medieval' and 'Middle Ages' above, a stream of consciousness exercise was completed featuring the word 'crusade'. The results are listed in Figure 6 below.

Knights	7
Jerusalem	6
War	6
Journey	5
The Pope	5
Christianity vs Islam	5
Battle	4
Muslims	4
Holy Orders (esp. 'Templars')	4
The Holy Land	4
Holy War	3
Armour	3
Religion	3
Christians	3
Saladin	3
<b>Figure 6: Responses to 'Crusade' Stream of Consciousness Exercises and Frequency (3+)</b>	

The overall pattern which emerges here is of Christian knights making a journey to Jerusalem at the behest of the Pope to fight Muslims, in other words: the Crusades in the Holy Land.

Unsurprisingly, given their perennial popularity in popular fiction, the Knights Templar were mentioned, as was Saladin.

As on the previous day, participants were then asked to define what crusade meant to them. In reply, they reported holding two coexisting but contradictory definitions. One definition relied upon the idea of historical, violent conflict between Christians and Muslims. The other was the more general sense of crusade, often used metaphorically to describe people or political movements. Interestingly, some participants fused these two ideas, claiming that the historical Crusades were a non-violent enterprise, and some projected contemporary politics and conflicts backwards upon the historical Crusades.

### **The historical Crusades**

One definition of 'crusade' described the historical wars between Christianity and Islam during the Middle Ages. This sometimes carried a negative connotation. Almost all who defined crusade in

this way referred only to the Crusades in the Holy Land, and the majority of specific examples were of the Third Crusade. Only Chloe made reference to any others: 'I think of them [the Crusades] more as Christians marching to defend their religion against- it's mainly Muslim but it can be other sects'. Here she broadens the idea of crusade beyond the Middle-Eastern theatre, and also takes the position that the crusades were a defensive religious action. This may have been the position that some medieval people might have taken; Balderic of Dol recounts that Pope Urban II, in calling for the First Crusade urged knights to 'advance boldly, as knights of Christ, and rush as quickly as you can to the defence of the Eastern Church'.<sup>342</sup> However, contemporary culture more often sees the Crusades as an aggressive rather than a defensive action.

Participants often dwelled on the Third Crusade. They said that the goal of the Crusades was the acquisition or defence of Jerusalem by Christians, and only two specific historical figures were mentioned, 'Richard the Lionheart' and 'Saladin'. Some said that their familiarity with the Crusades stemmed from Robin Hood stories, like Jess who mentioned 'They've always got Richard the Lionheart coming back at the end, 'cause he's been off fighting in the crusades'. Robin Hood's association with King Richard I (and by proxy, crusade) is a post-medieval invention of Anthony Munday, playwright of two Robin Hood plays: *The Downfall* and *The Death of Robert, Earl of Huntington* which he wrote at the close of the sixteenth century. In addition to creating Robin's typical role as a dispossessed nobleman, A.J. Pollard relates that 'Munday was responsible also for [...] transposing the plot to the reign of Richard I while he is absent on crusade, leaving his realm in the care of his wicked brother John'.<sup>343</sup> Subsequent versions of Robin Hood use the period of Richard I and John; for example, all of the Hollywood films that depict Robin Hood also place him

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<sup>342</sup> August Charles Krey, *The First Crusade: The Accounts of Eye-Witnesses and Participants* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1921), p. 35.

<sup>343</sup> A. J. Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood: The Late-Medieval Stories in Historical Context* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 15. For more on the development of the Robin Hood legend, especially in the Sixteenth Century, see: Peter Stallybrass, "Drunk with the Cup of Liberty": Robin Hood, the Carnavalesque, and the Rhetoric of Violence in Early Modern England', *Semiotica*, 54 (1985), 113-146; *Robin Hood: Medieval and Post-Medieval*, ed. by Helen Phillips (Four Courts Press, 2005); Knight.

during the reign of King Richard or King John, and many (including the famous 1922 *Robin Hood* starring Douglas Fairbanks) include narratives wherein Robin undertakes or escapes crusade.<sup>344</sup>

### **Crusader fashion**

Participants also described the prototypical image of a crusading knight. Chloe thought of 'lots of people in big cloaks'. Robert then expanded, 'knights on horseback and those capes [...] horses in, I dunno what the word is but the coat kinda thing'. Here they are probably referring to the surcoat developed for wear by European knights over their armour during the Crusades, and the similar caparison for the horse.

Justin incorrectly identified Saint George as a crusader, because George wears items that Justin associates with crusaders: 'particularly Saint George, because I envision him wearing the suit of armour with the red cross sort of style, and beards and stuff and chain maille going across and stuff'. He reported acquiring his image of George as the typical crusader from the climactic scene of 'Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, and the um, and the Holy Grail, when he goes in, and it's Saint George',<sup>345</sup> who has 'got his little Saint George armour on and you know the beard and stuff [...] with the chain maille on his head'. This archetypal image of the crusader as dressed in coif, maille and surcoat (most usually with the Templar cross) is pervasive in popular culture. However, Saint George was not a crusader nor is he associated with crusading. The red cross on a white field is only coincidentally used by both George and the Knights Templar. The grail knight in Indiana Jones However this image of the patron saint of England as a crusader may have fed the association some had with the crusades as an English endeavour.

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<sup>344</sup> Allan Dwan, *Robin Hood* (United Artists, 1922).

<sup>345</sup> The crusader in this scene in *The Last Crusade* is not St. George. The cross worn by that character seems to be a stylised image of a cup superimposed upon a version of the templar cross.

### **Moral 'crusades'**

The second definition of crusade was the metaphorical sense of a peaceful struggle in order to achieve a goal, often with the adjective 'moral' attached. This second definition almost exclusively referred to modern struggles, sometimes attributed to individuals and sometimes to grass-roots political movements. Erica thought crusade meant 'a long journey of getting to know yourself, getting to spread your message but not as like war [...] a big journey to spread your message and you always know yourself afterwards'. Chloe agreed, saying she felt that crusade 'was quite peaceful and about a journey rather than a conflict' and that it was about 'fighting for your religion, but in a non-violent way'.

Laura defined the word as 'a group of people who have one purpose mind [...] on a journey towards it, towards achieving it'. The June focus group felt strongly that the politics of this sort of crusading were 'very conservative', and were engaged in particularly by – in Stephen's words – 'little Englanders' and 'church-going folk who [...] are likely to get outraged'. They then associated moral crusading with the politics of the conservative *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* newspapers. Stephen repeated the connection between the figure of Saint George on the masthead of the *Daily Express* and crusading, because 'their logo is Saint George, isn't it? [...] with the shield and the red cross so it's got a crusade symbol on its letterhead of every paper every day'. Jess used the term, without the 'moral' descriptor, to apply to liberal politics as well, citing 'Al Gore going on his environmental crusade'. To Jess, the modern idea of crusade had positive connotations and the medieval, negative: 'there is more sort of like, sort of like good thing, crusades. Whereas if you look back sort of like on history and the legacy of the actual sort of medieval crusades it's more sort of like negative sort of connotations to it'.

### **Merged definitions: A moral, historical crusade?**

A few participants merged these two definitions, projecting the modern idea of a peaceful moral crusade backwards upon the Middle Ages and as a result reporting that the medieval Crusades

were not centred on war but were primarily cultural struggles. Erica felt that the Crusades (and, to her, 'holy war' in general) were primarily evangelical, being to 'defend your religion and, and spread the word of your religion'. Chloe agreed, saying 'I thought it was quite peaceful and about a journey rather than a conflict [...] its intent in the first place is to be peaceful'. Justin felt that the conflict was primarily cultural rather than military: 'I mean there's a certain amount of warfare probably, but more as in destroying certain things, uh, of the opposition rather than actually destroying them [...] trying to break down their culture in a way'. Stephen felt that the conflict of religions was central to the Crusades was unending, 'it seems about a clash of ideologies, and it's just going to go backwards and forwards and it's not going to resolve itself'. Interestingly, even though Stephen was referring to the historical Crusades in this instance, he uses the present tense to describe them, which may mean he is drawing unconscious linkages between past and present.

### **Modern crusades**

The June focus group projected their ideas of the modern conflicts in the Middle East onto the medieval Crusades. Katy felt that implicit in the word crusade was the idea of asymmetric warfare: 'I always associate it with one side being a lot stronger than the other'. Justin was more explicit, 'I'm not sure I see it as an actual war' calling it a 'historical guerrilla' war. Sean felt that crusade is 'more of an overwhelming thing', and to him the overwhelming side being 'in my mind, it's Christianity'. Justin then expressed his idea that the Muslim opposition to the Crusades was similar to a popular insurgency against an occupying force: 'I see sort of, you get Christians coming in and then everyone else in their houses and stuff and it's, it's more sort of, maybe a force against people [...] having a certain amount of resistance because people are so set in their beliefs'. These participants are filling in the blanks of their knowledge about the Crusades with something which they feel is an appropriate analogue: the contemporary wars in the Middle East. It is difficult to know why they feel that this is an appropriate analogue. The Crusades were not, in fact, a historical guerrilla war or an occupation by an overwhelming force. Perhaps it is based upon

the rhetoric used by those engaged in these contemporary wars which evokes crusading imagery (like George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden, discussed in chapter 4). Perhaps it is based upon what they felt is a similarity in the nature of the war: East versus West, Christendom versus Islam. Or, perhaps it is related to the sense (discussed above) that the Muslim world during the Middle Ages was not 'civilised', and therefore would be unable to mount an effective defence against the crusaders.

This idea of the Crusades as analogous to contemporary conflicts is doubly curious when compared with the typical image of the Crusades held by the participants: that of the clash between Richard I and Saladin during the Third Crusade. Participants never described Saladin as the leader of an insurgency or a guerrilla warrior, but as a king equal in status to his opponent Richard. Perhaps the participants are projecting their view of the present backwards onto the past as a way of justifying or rationalising their current experiences or world views. Projecting the present onto the past permits them to believe that the present is logical, even inevitable, because the conflicts that exist now have always existed in a similar form. By extension, this past and present will be perpetuated into an infinitely repeating future that is both comforting and disconcerting in its stability. Like many things in this study, while it is difficult to know why participants said some things as they did, it is important to draw some reasonable hypotheses. Only once that is done can we begin to consider whether, and how, historians might seek to change these public perceptions of the past.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the results of the focus groups which address the overarching question of how the participants would describe their understanding of the Middle Ages, and sub-questions about the sources they cite for those understandings, any differences between 'medieval' and 'Middle Ages', and their understanding of crusade. I found that participants held a number of discrete and often contradictory images of the Middle Ages and attributed different

characteristics to 'medieval' and 'Middle Ages'. On one hand, 'Middle Ages' is a strictly historical period populated with castles, monarchs and battles, while 'medieval' is a fantastical playground in which knights, magic, legend and fairy-tale exist. The medieval is a location for chivalric romance and adventure; the Middle Ages is an unpleasant age of barbarity, filth, poverty and warfare. Participants had some difficulty defining the Middle Ages in time except within a few thousand years. They were able chronologically to define the period with more confidence when connecting it with people in Britain (Anglo-Saxons, Normans, Vikings), or, less frequently, monarchs (sometimes labelling the Tudors and Stuarts as medieval). The Middle Ages were defined geographically as English or British (or, by some, Western European). As we have seen, this is unsurprising considering that the English National Curriculum never teaches the Middle Ages outside the British context and the popular culture they cited as sources all feature British characters and narratives.

The Crusades similarly held a binary definition for participants. On the one hand, the idea of crusade referred to the historical conflicts. Most participants believed that 'the Crusades' specifically refer to the Crusades in the Holy Land. Some projected their understandings of contemporary conflicts backwards onto the Crusades, seemingly in tandem with a 'gut reaction' which gave them a negative view of middle-eastern culture during the Middle Ages. Others felt that 'crusade' applied most to the more modern definition of the word as a 'moral crusade' which is a 'journey of self-discovery' or a peaceful political or social movement. They felt that this definition usually carried politically conservative and religious overtones.

Participants described having learned about the period from a variety of sources and directions, both academic and pop-culture, and both in childhood and adulthood. Most cited displeasure with their schooling on the topic in childhood (even though their education seems to have bequeathed some overarching paradigms). In contrast, many felt that their experiences at historical sites and museums were more enjoyable and memorable than those in the classroom. Since the memory of these experiences often focuses on dressing in medieval clothing and tasting



medieval food, this may partially explain the focus on food (esp. 'feasting') and clothing (esp. 'big dresses') in their general commentary about the period.

Popular culture made for children, especially Disney films, was cited as a major source. As adults, historical novels, video games, films and TV programmes were cited as sources for information. They approached each with a different level of scepticism about its historical veracity; video games and novels were generally regarded as reliable, film and TV, less so.

Many of the concepts established by these sources, whether it be the strict periodisation in the National Curriculum or the focus on technology and warfare of video games, were reflected in the participants' commentaries. The sources not only gave rise to participants' ideas but also seemed to shape their broader historical thinking. Additionally, participants seemed to misremember or forget the source of much of the information, which led to some anachronistic thinking (notably, that the 'last crusade' was an historical event). This exposes the power of popular culture to set images that cannot be reliably criticised: though participants may be inclined to disbelieve information seen in a Disney or fantasy film, if the original source is forgotten there is no way to differentiate between knowledge derived from reliable and unreliable sources.

One purpose of this chapter was to gain an understanding of the participants' viewpoints about the Middle Ages against which to compare their reactions when they later were confronted with the films shown in this study. Interestingly, no one singular image of the Middle Ages was found, even within the same participant. Instead, there was a variety of coexisting images and paradigms, many of which were in discord with each other, which participants seem to carry with little or no cognitive dissonance. Popular-cultural representations of the Middle Ages, therefore, do not rely upon a single image but use or subvert a number of competing images. Furthermore, audiences can interpret what they see in a film via a number of different schemata. The following chapter will explore how the participants interpreted the films which they were shown in the context of this multilayered condition.

## Chapter 6: Results II: What role do popular medieval films play in these students' understanding of the Middle Ages?

I wouldn't have seen it if I hadn't believed it.<sup>346</sup>

David L. Hamilton, *Cognitive Processes in Stereotyping and Intergroup Behavior*

After preliminary discussions, each of the groups was shown a film. On the first day they were shown *Beowulf*, on the second *Kingdom of Heaven* and on the third, *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*.<sup>347</sup> This chapter will discuss the participants' reactions to the three films separately and will explore the situations in which the participants reported learning from the films. The chapter is accordingly concerned with the third research question: 'What role do popular medieval films play in these students' understanding of the Middle Ages?' In tackling this, the chapter first addresses the participants' responses to the films broadly, including the strategies and language participants employed when discussing the films' historical accuracy and believability. Next, responses to each film on its own are addressed, particularly in light of the issues and questions raised by the previous two chapters. A cross-film thematic analysis will be provided in chapter 7.

It is important to note that in this chapter and chapter 7, reference is frequently made to participants' 'knowledge'. When doing so, the sense of the word is employed as it is used in sociology, as discussed in chapter 2. Hence, when discussing a participant's knowledge, no value-judgement is being made on whether that knowledge is true or false. Rather, the word refers neutrally to participants' collection of ideas or understandings, in relation to the information presented by each film. Also, use of the term does not comment on participants' confidence in their knowledge. The words 'concept', 'idea' and 'understanding' are used neutrally to denote a

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<sup>346</sup> David L. Hamilton, *Cognitive Processes in Stereotyping and Intergroup Behavior* (Hillsdale, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1981), p. 137.

<sup>347</sup> When referring to the novels I use the term *The Lord of the Rings*. When referring to the 2003 Peter Jackson film, I use the term *Return of the King*. When referring to the three *The Lord of the Rings* films collectively, I will make it explicit that I am referring to the films instead of the novels. Unfortunately the terminology used by the participants in the focus group varies and is occasionally confusing.

unit of knowledge, and are treated as synonyms. The term 'prior knowledge' (and similar) is not used as the idea it conveys is redundant: all knowledge is understood to have been established prior to the present.

### **Participants' interpretation strategies**

None of the participants accepted everything they saw; neither did they reject everything. When analysing the films, each showed a complex process in which they compared what they had seen to their knowledge, their political perspective or their common sense. Having done this, they came to a series of conclusions about aspects of the films.

Often, what participants saw corresponded with their knowledge. In these cases, most accepted what they had seen as accurate, which appeared to reinforce their knowledge. When participants perceived that the information being presented to them by the film differed from their ideas, one of four things occurred: they

1. accepted what they saw as more valid than what they previously understood;
2. rejected what they had gleaned in favour of what they had previously understood;
3. negotiated an acceptance of both—usually with the film's example being explained as "an exception to the rule" but occasionally merging the conflicting ideas differently; or they
4. misremembered what they had seen in the film in order to make it fit with their knowledge.

### **Acceptance and rejection**

Most commonly, participants either accepted what they had seen in the film as more valid than their knowledge or rejected what they had seen in favour of their knowledge. They often made critical comparisons between what they knew and what they saw, weighing how believable what they had seen was against how confident they were in their knowledge. Many factors had an impact upon their confidence in their knowledge. None were more important than their memory of the source of the idea, and the context in which it was learned (see, for example, the discussion

below of learning about *Beowulf* in primary school, p. 179). However, participants often had most confidence in knowledge for which they could not remember the origin.

Participants' judgements commonly seemed quick and instinctual. Only infrequently did participants' comments show internal deliberation processes (though many social ones were seen). When the film agreed with their knowledge, many used the language of pleasure to describe it, such as the phrase 'I liked...'. Some of these ideas about the Middle Ages were closely held, eliciting negative emotions when challenged. On the other hand, some were more flexible, where participants were readily willing to find exception and nuance. Each individual differed; some were more flexible in their understanding than others and willing to accept new information, whereas others were more conservative. Sometimes participants would critically analyse their knowledge based upon its internal logic, though this was more often done with reference to the films.

Many factors affected participants' perceptions of realism and plausibility, and thus whether the film was judged to be a reliable historical source from which to learn. Interestingly, these factors often bore little relation to the actual historical accuracy of the film. Instead, many of them were generic tropes or filmmaking techniques which the participants felt made the film more, or less, historically valid. The perceived historicity of a film was thus often a product of cinematic technique or genre rather than anything to do with actual historical veracity.

### **Negotiation**

Occasionally, when information in the films conflicted with their knowledge, participants found ways to compromise. Sometimes the film exposed areas where two pieces of knowledge conflicted. When this happened, the film was usually used as support for one of the two conflicting ideas. Alternatively, sometimes the dissonance was resolved by a synthesis of the two ideas into a new more nuanced concept, with exceptions to their established rule. A common tactic for judgement was the application of logic or 'common sense' to the question of which idea

was superior, or a comparison of sources. This did not always lead the participants to the correct conclusion. Negotiated interpretations were often treated as exceptions to a confidently-held idea.

### **False memories**

The tactic that was observed least commonly for dealing with internal dissonance between a participant's knowledge and the film was misremembering. When this did occur, a participant would, seemingly without awareness of having done so, replace something seen in the film with a false memory that coincided with their expectations (as dictated by their schema on the subject). This phenomenon has been explored by schema theory.<sup>348</sup> In 1932 Frederic Bartlett found that people unfamiliar with the cultural context of a Native American folktale frequently misremembered details of the story in line with their cultural expectations and schemata.<sup>349</sup> The participants in this study often acted similarly, misremembering details of the films in line with their expectations of the period.

These false memories are illuminating and provide insights into participants' expectations and schemata. Additionally, according to schema theory, as time goes on, the likelihood that their memory of will be distorted in line with their expectations increases (the 'false memory sleeper effect').<sup>350</sup> Unambiguous false memories were infrequent since these focus group interviews were conducted immediately after the film. However, the fact that false memories are formed almost immediately after the seeing the film seems to indicate the important role schema and memory plays in the process of interpreting films.

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<sup>348</sup> Discussed previously, p. 23.

<sup>349</sup> Charles J. Brainerd and Valerie F. Reyna, *The Science of False Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 19-21.

<sup>350</sup> Brainerd and Reyna, pp. 22-24.

## Participants' use of terms

Understanding the vocabulary that participants used was important in analysing the interpretive process just described. While there was some inconsistency in the way participants used terms, overall they described the films (or elements in them) in one of four ways:

1. 'medieval' or 'not medieval' (or points between)
2. 'realistic' or 'not realistic'
3. 'believable' or 'not believable'
4. 'accurate' or 'inaccurate'

Each time one of these terms was used, participants seemed to be addressing one of the following questions:

1. How does this element compare with my expectations of the Middle Ages?
2. How does this element compare with my expectations of a film of this type?<sup>351</sup>
3. How does this element compare with my expectations of the world generally?

### Defining 'medievalness'

When participants referred to the first question outlined above, they were simply describing to what degree it agreed with their expectations and knowledge of the period. None of them had any difficulty understanding or responding to the questions posed by the moderator: 'what about the film seemed particularly medieval to you?' and 'what about the film seemed less medieval to you?' This differs from a hypothetical rigidly historical perspective, where it can be argued that something either is medieval or it is not.

Participants rarely used such a rigid interpretation; they frequently used relativistic adjectives when to describe *how medieval* something was, like 'really medieval' 'quite medieval' or 'not very medieval'. There is no adequate term which encapsulates the idea of the degree to which something is medieval, or possessed of a relative 'medieval' quality. Participants dealt with

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<sup>351</sup> By 'of this type' I mean either a film which depicts the Middle Ages or a historical film more generally.

this by using a variety of words to refer to whether something was 'medieval' or not. These included 'medievalish' 'middle-agey' 'medievaly' and 'un-medieval', in addition to the more common 'medieval' or 'of the Middle Ages'. I use the term 'medievalness' to describe this perceived quality. This quality of 'medievalness' relates exactly to what Bildhauer and Bernau seek when they discuss 'the usefulness of classifying medieval films as those which are *perceived* to be medieval films by individual recipients or producers, but this still would leave the question open as to which features of the films lead to such perceptions'.<sup>352</sup> Those features which participants describe as 'very medieval' are surely part of the answer to Bildhauer and Bernau's question (as discussed, p. 22).

Most participants had little trouble expressing the concept of this relative quality of 'medievalness'. This may be a result of the fact that 'medieval' is an adjective, and as such can describe things not actually from the Middle Ages (as discussed in chapter 5).

### **Realism**

When using the words 'realistic' or 'unrealistic', participants were expressing three separate underlying ideas. However, none of those ideas correspond with the ways in which the term is used by film theorists. In film theory, 'realism' is a highly discussed and contested term with a long history. Theorists of realism like André Bazin define realism as an aesthetic break from theatricality and artifice in film, where film holds the unique potential to reproduce life as it exists in reality. As Bazin writes, 'illusion in the cinema is not based as it is in the theatre on convention tacitly accepted by the general public; rather contrariwise, it is based on the inalienable realism of that which is shown'.<sup>353</sup> However, cinema has invented its own tacitly-accepted aesthetic conventions, such as the use of continuity editing and montage to construct narrative, which are fundamental to the dominant, classical 'Hollywood' style of filmmaking.<sup>354</sup> This has led some to

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<sup>352</sup> Bernau and Bildhauer, p. 2.

<sup>353</sup> André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, trans. by Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 108.

<sup>354</sup> For analysis of the aesthetics of the classical Hollywood style, see: David Bordwell, 'The Classical Hollywood Style, 1917-1960', in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*

argue that 'realism cannot be dominant in the cinema because Hollywood cinema is not realistic'.<sup>355</sup> Many cinematic movements have broken with Hollywood's conventions in order to attempt a more realistic aesthetic style, for example Italian Neo-Realism and *Cinéma Vérité*.<sup>356</sup> This thesis does not intend to enter this debate, only to point out that the participants here used the term in a different manner.

Firstly, when using the terms 'realistic' or 'unrealistic', participants sometimes intended to express the commonplace understanding of 'realistic': how it conforms to their expectations of the world based on their experience, logic or 'common sense'. For example, some referred to the monsters in *Beowulf* and *Return of the King* as 'unrealistic' because they do not exist in the real world. Alternatively, participants were sometimes referring to the degree to which they felt the film was historically accurate. Something that fitted with their historical knowledge was considered 'realistic', and the reverse. Sometimes, these words related instead to whether the film fulfilled their expectations of a medieval film, a historical film or a film generally. Often these expectations were only obliquely related to history. Ray Winstone's Cockney accent, for example (more on this below) was considered 'unrealistic' because it was considered 'not medieval', whereas this accent was no more or less 'realistic' than Received Pronunciation English; neither existed during the Middle Ages.

### **Believability**

When participants used the terms 'believable' or 'not believable', they were typically referring to elements of the narrative or plot, and relating them to either their expectations of film aesthetics

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(London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 1-84. Though Bordwell and others argued in 1985 that the demise of the studio system by 1960 irrevocably changed the Hollywood style, in 2003 he revised his opinion: 'Hollywood storytelling hasn't fundamentally altered since the studio days', 'Contrary to claims that Hollywood style has become post-classical, we are still dealing with a variant of classical filmmaking [...] nearly all scenes in nearly all contemporary mass-market movies (and in most "independent" films) are staged, shot, and cut according to principles which crystallised in the 1910s and 1920s'. David Bordwell, 'Intensified Continuity Visual Style in Contemporary American Film', *Film Quarterly*, 55 (2002), 16-28 (pp. 16, 24).

<sup>355</sup> Colin MacCabe, 'Theory and Film: Principles of Realism and Pleasure', *Screen*, 17 (1976), 7-28 (p. 9).

<sup>356</sup> André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?, Volume 2*, trans. by Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 16-40; Richard Meran Barsam, *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History*, Rev. & expanded (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 301-305.



or genre, or their expectations of the world. The 'believable' or 'not believable' discussions almost never related to their knowledge of history. Whereas 'realistic' was typically used to describe visual aspects of the film, 'believable' was typically used to describe elements of the narrative. When describing the visual aspects, 'realistic' referred mostly to how the element in question correlated to participants' knowledge of the past. When discussing the narratological elements of the film, they generally were referring either to how well it related to their understanding of the world or how the world was depicted in film. However, these concepts are held in isolation from one another, as will be illustrated below. A poor assessment of overall 'realism', in the sense that the film seemed implausible or did not adhere to its genre, often led participants to believe the film to be less historically trustworthy. The reverse was also often true.

With this said, when participants felt that the filmmakers were violating film conventions (and their expectations of the film) – particularly in cases where the violation was deemed plausible and historically accurate – participants often lauded the deviation. Most participants held the idea that overt Hollywood conventionality was undesirable and made a film less believable. Additionally, they felt that Hollywood conventionality often caused deviations from history and reality.

On the other hand, more complex reactions occurred when they saw something which they felt was presented in a historically accurate way and agreed with their knowledge but differed from their sense of logic or common sense. When this occurred, they often weighed to what degree they felt the film was historically trustworthy against the implausibility of the situation presented. Sometimes their knowledge of history overruled their common sense (as in the perception of the accuracy of the bizarre religious rituals in *Kingdom of Heaven*, even though they seem implausible). Sometimes their sense of logic overruled their knowledge (as in the judgement that Jerusalem is indeed an appropriate setting for a medieval film even though it is not typical).

These processes seemed to be linked with participants' overall satisfaction with a film. When they perceived that the film was telling the truth (whether a historical, allegorical or general truth) they described the experience as pleasurable, as in 'I liked' or 'I enjoyed'. When they judged the film to be deceiving them, they typically expressed this through the language of displeasure, as in 'I didn't like'. This process of applying common sense and logic to learning about the Middle Ages is occasionally problematic. Often, aspects of medieval culture, particularly medieval intellectual culture, run contrary to the logic or common sense of a modern person. As a result, incorrect conclusions about the accuracy of a film, and thus the Middle Ages, can be reached.

### **Accuracy**

Finally, on the few occasions in which participants used the language of 'accurate' or 'inaccurate', they were usually expressing one of two things. One was that what they had seen corresponded strongly with what they knew about the period (similarly to the use of 'medieval' as above, but with more emphasis); the other was a result of the comparative and judgement process described above. Since the sample consisted of participants who had little academic experience of the Middle Ages, on almost all of the occasions when they judged a film's historical accuracy, the judgement was based upon knowledge learned in primary school, in popular culture (as discussed in chapter 7) or from the film itself.

### ***Beowulf***

This section will describe the participants' reactions to the film *Beowulf* including ways in which the film appeared to influence their understandings of the Middle Ages. Included are discussions of their previous experience with the poem, their attempts to place *Beowulf* in terms of their understanding of history, and discussions about the unique aesthetic and linguistic features of the film.

### Previous experience with the poem

In chapter 4 we saw that one of the notable features of the film *Beowulf* is that it is an adaptation of a piece of well-known medieval literature. So, did its meta-textual status affect participants' interpretations? Does the film's status as an adaptation of medieval literature make it seem more medieval, or was it treated like any other fantasy?

Some participants had previous experience with the poem *Beowulf* which impacted upon their interpretation of the film. Four of the thirteen participants spontaneously mentioned that they had been taught *Beowulf* in primary school, and that their interpretations of the film were founded upon this education. Erica recounted:

Erica: I read the poem, well, had the poem read to us and stuff.

Mod: Mhm. When did you have the poem read to you?

Erica: Em, primary school, I think, yeah, so I kinda knew what it was about.

Mod: Okay.

Erica: So it [the film] was pretty well done.

For Erica, her perception that the film adhered closely to the original poem was the basis for her positive judgement of the film. However, she did not stop there. Later, she recounted how her memory of the framing device her teacher(s) used when teaching the poem shaped her interpretation of the film:

I always remember the poem, em, from primary school as being quite, like em, like not violent but kinda like raw and kind of, um I remember doing at primary school how nasty the Vikings were and that was one of the poems they read to us and we had to like study and stuff how nasty it all was and how like barbaric and all that kind of stuff but then in the film, it wasn't like that at all, it was kind of like the hero coming to save the day, it was, you know it was a bit too much general hero, villain, princess kind of thing, whereas in the poem it was kind of more I don't remember it, it was kind of like, it was read out to be like, look how barbaric the Vikings were, look how horrible they were [...]

The impact of her previous experience on her ideas about the film was not as simple as critiquing the film's adherence to the original poem. To Erica, her memory of learning about the poem *Beowulf* in primary school centred on an interpretation of the Vikings' barbarity. She criticised the film for adhering to Hollywood adventure movie tropes at the expense of her memory of the

original. Without knowing further about the teacher's specific lessons about the poem it is difficult to comment—Erica's memories may or may not be accurate. However, her memory that the poem was interpreted in terms of 'look how barbaric the Vikings were, look how horrible they were, yeah they're vici- yeah they're really vicious', seems odd. The poem does not depict Vikings. Though it is set in Denmark, and Geatland (now Götaland in southern Sweden), the story takes place and was possibly written before the Viking Age (between the late eighth and eleventh centuries).<sup>357</sup> Furthermore, contrary to her perception that the film was 'was a bit too much general hero, villain, princess kind of thing', the poem features heroes defeating monsters (though no princesses, as discussed, pp. 74 and 229). Her reaction against the film in this way may have been a result of her feeling that the film was too conventional, but couching her argument in terms of the film's fidelity to the original.

Stephen and Justin (who apparently attended the same school) also covered Beowulf in primary school, but with a very different interpretation:

- Stephen: Yeah, it's the bit you do over here in schools. 'cause I remember covering Beowulf to some extent but I think the story kind of stopped with 'And he killed the mother and that was it'. Instead he had sex with the mother, fathered a dragon child and killed him and his wife and his mistress. Yeah, they kind of stopped it at 'yeah, killed Grendel's mother, happily ever after'. (laugh) I remember trying to draw a cartoon strip of it. You remember Mrs Baldwin's class?
- Justin: Yeah.
- Mod: Okay. So, so, the seedy bits, the sort of raw bits, the extra sort of sex bits you thought were a bit, so they fit all sort of together as one?
- Stephen: Yeah, I think that, yeah it's more representative than the stuff at school.

To Stephen the film diverted from his expectations of the poem because it included 'seediness' and sex that would not be taught to children in school. Stephen, however, rejected his childhood memory and accepted the sexual narrative (which only exists in the film, as discussed in chapter 4)

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<sup>357</sup> The dating of Beowulf was discussed previously, p. 65. For dates of 'the Viking Age' in Scandinavian history (and the invention of the term), see: Eric Christiansen, *The Norsemen in the Viking Age* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), pp. 4-9; Peter H. Sawyer, 'The Age of the Vikings, and Before', in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, ed. by Peter H. Sawyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 1-18.

as authentic. Stephen later questioned the film's overall trustworthiness – 'It is always interesting to see how much of the story had been changed' – to which Justin replied, 'Probably quite a lot I would have thought'. They regarded the sexual narrative of the film as more reliable than their childhood memories of the poem, simply because sex is often omitted in children's versions of stories. However, the film's adherence to its source overall remained suspect.

Participants also felt that Hollywood filmmaking tropes interfered with the interpretation of the original. Erica said that filmmakers 'water some stuff down to try to get as much viewers as possible. I don't think they've kind of really taken into account kind of the historical value of it, just kind of thought, like, if we do it this way more people will come' and also that they 'try to make it as mainstream as possible and, was like, yeah, not keeping to the true story really, the poem and stuff. Yeah, ruined it a bit'. To her, the story of *Beowulf* is valuable because of its history. Her sense that the filmmakers tried to 'make it as mainstream as possible' conflicted with a faithful adaptation. She even used loaded language that this 'ruined' the film for her. Similarly, when asked how the fantastical elements in the film related to the historical elements in the film, three of the June group answered:

Sean: Was there a dragon in the original poem?

Stephen: I'm not sure.

Justin: I can't remember there being a dragon.

Stephen: No, well, I can say we kinda stopped at Grendel's mother [in school], I didn't realise he fathered a=

Justin: =yeah I didn't realise there was a dragon there but the dragon kind of keys into it when you think of a medieval tale.

Sean: It does.

Stephen: I think it would be very interesting if, if there isn't a dragon in the original poem, because that suggests that Hollywood has added a dragon. Because it's a medieval film and therefore it has to have a dragon in it.

They admit that their memory of the poem is incomplete; it is possible that they were never taught the final episode of the poem in school. This idea might have been reinforced by the fact that no other film or TV adaptation of *Beowulf* includes the final episode with the dragon.

Furthermore, Stephen recapitulated the plot point that Beowulf fathered a dragon (which exists

only in the Zemeckis film) as if it were an omitted part of the original. He supports the idea that it is authentically medieval because the dragon coincides with his knowledge—as a common figure in medieval and medievalist fantasy.

Yet this explanation seems too pat to them. Here they show a complex decision-making process, trying to discern whether what they have seen is believable.<sup>358</sup> On the one hand, a dragon is the archetypal medieval monster and as such may have been in the original. On the other, this very universality makes it suspiciously conventional. Stephen later added, ‘Either this story is where the idea of a dragon in every fantasy comes from, or, Hollywood has thought “It’s a medieval fantasy therefore it needs a dragon”’. Stephen does not know that both may be true; the first theory is arguably true, but the second is also not without merit. But these participants saw Hollywood’s influence as corrupting by default – the tropes of Hollywood are antithetical to fidelity to the original poem. As a result, at any point when the filmmakers’ presence became apparent, the film was not to be trusted.

### **Beowulf as history and/or fantasy**

Beowulf occupies an uncomfortable middle ground between historical epic and fantasy. While the film *Beowulf* is ostensibly set in a real place and time (stated as ‘Denmark, A.D. 507’ by the opening subtitle), it contains many fantastical elements, including three different monsters. This is further complicated by the fact that *Beowulf*, being written during the Middle Ages, may cause a viewer familiar with the poem’s origins to excuse the forays into fantasy. One of my central questions relates to the way in which the participants viewed *Beowulf* as a piece of history. Did they experience any cognitive dissonance when viewing the film as both fantastical and historical? To what degree did they see *Beowulf* as a medieval film?

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<sup>358</sup> One strategy employed by these three participants in their decision-making about the dragon was questioning the moderator (as a perceived authority on the subject), asking, ‘Do you know, do you know the original poem?’ The moderator only answered, ‘A little, yeah’, which they interpreted, correctly, as a way of communicating that the moderator could not participate in the discussion and that they would have to decide for themselves.

As would be expected of adults, none of the participants believed that *Beowulf* presented a true story. As a result, some also refused to identify the film as medieval. Erica said that *Beowulf* was ‘trying to be more of a fantasy, than the historical’ because of ‘the different types of monsters and the whole [...] mythology about them’.<sup>359</sup> Jess also rejected the film as a depiction of the Middle Ages, ‘Because it was like a fairy story, you know what I mean? Like the Middle Ages were a real time period so they didn’t actually have dragons’. To both, the inclusion of fantasy elements excluded the film from consideration as a depiction of the period.

Some saw the film as a hybrid between a history and a fantasy. Robert said ‘It seems that it’s jumpin’ on the Lord of the Rings bandwagon cause, like I’d, like, as a film, I didn’t really get what he’s aimin’ at cause there’s parts of it where I think it’s aimin’ at like, historical accuracy but other times it’s ridiculous’. Though Justin had seen fantasy films before, he identified *Beowulf* as special because ‘it was quite original in the sense that it showed you, I mean I hadn’t really seen too many movies that showed the Middle Ages quite in that same kind of complete mystical way like that did’. To him, the film was not a fantasy, but a medieval film that presented the Middle Ages in a magical way.

Although none of the participants believed *Beowulf* told a completely true story and some rejected the film as a depiction of the Middle Ages, none had difficulty identifying certain scenes or aspects of the film as medieval. All participants thought of the film as having a historical flavour, but differed over what specific historical period(s) it represented.

Participants reacted variously in how they felt it compared to their knowledge of the Middle Ages. Some felt *Beowulf* to be ‘very medieval’. Chloe said ‘I thought it was a really medieval movie’, to which Erica then expanded, ‘In my medieval sheet [word association], basically everything that I’d written down was in the film’. When pressed for specifics, she said ‘Battles, kings, swords, armour, monsters, dragons, knights, religion, division between rich and

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<sup>359</sup> Participants often used the terms ‘mythology’ and ‘fantasy’ interchangeably. In this instance, Erica was referring to the familial relationship between the monsters (all bound together with the paternal narrative discussed in chapter 4).

poor, hog roasts, medieval, like, harpy music' and 'Everything I'd written down was in that film'. John reported that 'on a scale of one to ten' on how medieval the film was to him 'probably about 8'.

The opening scene – the feast in Heorot that is interrupted by Grendel's assault – was singled out as 'typically' medieval. Erica related, 'I thought the first, the first scene, the banquet scene, that was typical, what I would expect—assume from, from what I'd seen stuff that was pretty much typical, and I thought that was really well done and like, em, it captured, em, like quite a lot of glimpses of like medieval life in like one scene'. When pressed, she added 'most everything on my sheet was like was pictured in that first scene, um, like there was like banquets, lovey music [...] the drunken people, there was people in the armour and it had a little bit of fights, and, like the hogroast, and then the king sat on his throne, and everything basically that you saw of being medieval was, was in that scene'.

However, some participants resisted thinking of *Beowulf* in terms of the Middle Ages. Justin said 'It doesn't, it didn't fit in my, in with the archetypal image that I had of medieval'. Dan saw it more in terms of fantasy than history, 'I didn't think it was especially middle-agesy that wasn't-what struck me was more fantasy realm where other things were happening, maybe, like, featured through the Middle Ages a bit more'. Jess took issue with the film's medievalness both as a result of her negative reaction to the film's lack of realism and also to its setting: 'I just, I don't know, when I think Middle Ages, fair enough maybe feasts and stuff are sort of what I think of it, but the rest of it, like the entire story line just felt so, I mean just so ridiculous, you know what I mean and I thought "maybe in Denmark" but I wasn't thinking "oh that could easily happen here" [...]it was like a fairy story, you know what I mean? Like the Middle Ages were a real time period so they didn't actually have dragons'. Because of the addition of a dragon (and presumably the other monsters), she felt that the film no longer qualified as being set in the Middle Ages since that is a 'real time period'. Interestingly, this seems to contradict her previous statement that in the film 'there was loads of monsters and stuff which, fair enough, you kind of associate with like



Middle Ages'. Jess intuitively understands the received image of the Middle Ages as a location for fantasy and monsters, but in this instance rejects it in favour of a more rigid definition, possibly due to her frequently-expressed overall dislike of the film.

### ***Beowulf's* Dark Ages**

In further discussion, some of the participants who identified *Beowulf* as 'very medieval' later expressed discomfort with that label. Much of this uneasiness centred around participants' perception that this film was set in the 'Dark Ages' and about 'Vikings', which, for some, placed the film in a different period or place to the Middle Ages. Erica said, 'I do class medieval as being like, British and kind of like, that kind of vibe, whereas, yeah, Vikings I didn't really class as medieval [...] It would be before medieval'. Justin saw the opening scene as pre-medieval; 'Especially the beginning, it's not how I would have seen the Middle Ages, I would have thought that was way before, but, well not way before but, you know, a hundred years before maybe'. Stephen followed, 'I never realised that the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings were actually part of the Middle Ages I thought it [the Middle Ages] kind of came after but I suppose that doesn't really make sense it's kind of, I suppose in school you think, [...] that in the neat segmented view of history that you have the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings and then the Middle Ages and then the Tudors'. Stephen here is coming to terms with a strict periodisation that he remembers learning in school. As discussed in chapter 5 (p. 133), students are taught 'Romans, Anglo-Saxons and Vikings' together in a module at key stage 2. As a result it is unsurprising that Stephen did not associate the Anglo-Saxons or the Vikings with the Middle Ages, since they are taught together with an earlier period, with their own label, and not linked to later medieval Britain.

Participants gave a variety of reasons for labelling *Beowulf* a film set before to the Middle Ages, citing most frequently either the material culture or the social culture depicted in the film, but never the date (A.D. 507) given in the opening subtitle (which is the marker with which historians would label the film as set in the very early Middle Ages, if not before). The most

frequently cited indicators of period which placed *Beowulf* either in or before the Middle Ages were centred on architectural development and the emergence of the monarch.

### **The changing medieval world in *Beowulf***

As discussed in chapter 4, the built landscape represented in *Beowulf* changes over the course of the film. It begins in a version of the early Middle Ages, but changes into something that more closely resembles a fantastical version of the high Middle Ages by the end. Some made particular note of this. Justin initially found the appearance of the world of *Beowulf* as differing from his expectations because he 'expected it to be a bit more developed and a bit bigger than that really, a bit more advanced'. When asked to clarify, he said: 'the settlements would be bigger [...] and there'd be a bunch of agricultural things that you could see, like ploughed fields and things like that. I didn't expect it to be built settlements like uh, like I saw in that film, I expected it to be much grander really'. Stephen, in response to a question asking whether there was anything not felt to be 'particularly medieval', replied, 'Well after much talking about it in the initial stages [of the focus group], talking about knights and castles and things like that there's none of that, but presumably that came hundreds of years later'. Justin then added, 'There's kind of a bit towards the end though where it looked as if it had developed a bit more'. Jess also noted the change. At first, she reacted positively to the depiction of Heorot as exemplary of the Middle Ages 'I like the hall in the first part, it seemed quite hall-y to me, middle agey'. When pressed for clarification, she expressed a discomfort with its change over the course of the film,

it was quite, sort of, primitive, hunting, feasting area, mead hall lot. And then, yeah I dunno, I don't believe they'd have gone from like that, that, shanty sort of town to that like castle [...]the second castle as well, just seemed really, like why would you build two towers with a bridge next to it? [...] a really impractical design. I don't think that was very realistic.

Justin and Stephen felt the architectural changes brought the film more in line with their knowledge of the Middle Ages. Jess, on the other hand, viewed the change negatively because of the castle's implausible design, which fits with Jess' stricter interpretation of the Middle Ages as a

historical period absent all fantasy. The 'primitive' aspect of the original design of Heorot fit her expectations of the Middle Ages, the later design fit less well and caused her to question not only its historical accuracy but whether what she was being shown was medieval at all.

### **Ahistoricity and universality of *Beowulf***

A few thought of the narrative ahistorically, as a universal story that was only medieval because it had been made so by the filmmakers. John felt the narrative elements were independent of period; the inclusion of magic necessitated it being placed in the Middle Ages by the filmmakers:

The story's been set on purpose in that age, middle age or medieval times, uh, to make it seem more of a complete story. I mean the story's the story on its own, if you took away all the little descriptions on it it's about someone who's in power who had like, like a shameful past or whatever, and you could change it to fit into modern day times [...] If it's set in medieval times, um, no one alive today, well some people might have an idea what it's like but I think most viewers it just makes it much more believable to them. [...] they can imagine dragons existing in medieval times because they weren't alive.

For reasons similar to those described above, John accepts the narrative of the film as the story of *Beowulf*, since the original has no narrative about a 'shameful past'. Erica also saw the narrative as universal, with armour being the only thing which locates it in history: 'you could have put him in any, any kind of costume and he would have gone in any time. [...] all that's different about him is, is just the armour'.

In sum, the multiple images of the Middle Ages made it difficult for these participants reliably to place *Beowulf* historically. On the one hand, most accepted the film as very 'medieval' because it portrayed what they perceived as a more barbaric age rife with the extremes of human indulgence – lust, gluttony, drunkenness and violence. However, the change from early Middle Ages to high Middle Ages was noticed and celebrated by most participants. They enjoyed the depiction of the cultural change towards a world more in line with the Middle Ages they understood. Some had little difficulty viewing *Beowulf* as a film both medieval and fantastical. They engaged historically with those aspects they deemed historical, and did not do so with

aspects they deemed fantastical. However, some had a more rigid interpretation; for them this hybridity did not sit well. These people were disinclined to believe anything on the screen as being historical once fantastical elements were introduced.

### **Did *Beowulf*'s CGI make it less believable as a historical film?**

Consistent criticism of *Beowulf* as a film centred around two things. Firstly, the participants disliked the motion-capture CGI techniques used to render the film's visuals. Sean claimed that the CGI hampered his ability to engage with the film: 'I do have a bit of a problem getting into the story if it's animated'. Participants also noted that the animation made the film seem 'for kids'. John was one of only two who enjoyed the CGI, but even he damns it with faint praise: 'I thought the CGI would be much worse'.

The participants' dislike of the CGI in *Beowulf* might not at first seem to be related to their knowledge of the Middle Ages or their learning from the film (and thus outside the purview of this thesis). However, criticisms of the CGI techniques used in *Beowulf* often employed the language of historical veracity. For example, Robert said 'I kinda felt that [the CGI] took away from it, that was another thing that I thought was like, there was a mixture between pandering to the mainstream and this uh, trying to be historically accurate'. To Robert, 'pandering to the mainstream' and making a historically accurate film are antithetical and the CGI one element in that rift. Chloe was more explicit; to her the technological nature of the CGI excluded the film from being considered truly medieval. When asked, 'which bits do you think they could have changed to make it more medieval, or more of the Middle Ages?' She replied:

- Chloe: Taken away the computer graphics, and doing it, as he said earlier, with actors and actresses, and using the old animation for dragons, or...
- Moderator: So the, um, so the CGI in and of itself doesn't seem medieval to you then?
- Chloe: Mmm. I would agree with that.
- Moderator: Why? Why do you think that?
- Chloe: 'cause you know it's computer, not people, and immediately that takes away I think, well, puts a big thing in front of me that makes me not able to put it into perspective in real life.

To Chloe, a CGI film cannot be medieval; to her a historical film's job is to interpret real events for her. The CGI is seen as an interfering layer between her and the history on the screen.

Erica and Robert took issue with the technology. To them, technology violated what they expected of a medieval film. Erica reported 'Whenever I think of medieval, I always think of like, Robin Hood, kind of crappy, anim- kind of like, really crappy effects and like I don't know, like, that kind of vibe about it makes it seem more medieval, whereas if it's like computer generated and all like sparkly and polished it's too new'. Robert then added, 'It's not a very like, sparkly and polished like time is it'. To them, in spite of the grittiness and blood, the CGI gives them a sense of newness. Erica is the most explicit in her criticism of the CGI of the film as being antithetical to historical accuracy: 'because the main emphasis in the film was that it was animated and that it was made for 3D and I don't think they really concentrated on the story that much'. She then went on to argue that a CGI film would not employ experts like costume designers who would 'do the research'. To all, the technology called attention to itself as a product of the current age rather than the medieval one.

Participants did not only balk at the CGI in *Beowulf* for aesthetic reasons, but also historical ones. To them the CGI aesthetic – slick, technological, glossy – is at odds with the medieval aesthetic: rough and old-fashioned. Thus the CGI led them to question the historical authenticity of the film and seemed to impede their learning from it. However, a traditional movie camera is no more medieval than a motion-capture computer, yet none of the participants took issue with the Middle Ages being depicted in film at all. Future generations may become accustomed to viewing CGI as a valid way of presenting history, but from this study it seems many in the current generation do not.

### Language: Accents and Old English

Language and accent play a part in establishing the setting of a film and establishing a sense of its historical authenticity. The second major criticism levelled against *Beowulf* was that aspects of the language were inappropriate for a medieval film.

Firstly, all but one of the participants noted the accents, particularly the ‘cockney’ accent Ray Winstone’s portrayal of Beowulf, and the ‘American’ accent of John Malkovich’s portrayal of Unferth. For example Jake felt: ‘in Beowulf they did have some accents where, which were American, which obviously don’t fit a middle age film’. However, participants who reacted negatively to the accents in *Beowulf* had difficulty in proposing a better alternative. When asked ‘What sort of accent would you expect him to have then?’, Robert replied ‘if they’re going for historical accuracy go for a Danish actor, or get Ray Winstone to have a bash (laugh) at a Danish accent’. Justin said the expected accent would be ‘Swedish’. Each of these suggestions for improvement would be equally historically inaccurate; neither modern Danes nor Swedes speak in the Old English of the *Beowulf* poet, though Robert and Justin may not have realised this.

Immediately after this request for a Swedish accent, Justin backpedalled: ‘just like the music in the film we wouldn’t have known as to what the music would have been like or anything like that, but the, the accents – I mean, the Cockney accents sounded wrong. John Malkovich’s slightly American accent sounded wrong’. Justin unpacks his idea that a modern foreign accent would be more historically accurate than the natural accents of Ray Winstone or John Malkovich. He seems aware that his intuition that the accents and music ‘sounded wrong’ may have little to do with his knowledge of history. Even assuming participants may have misunderstood that Anglo-Saxon is not the same as modern Danish or Swedish, none suggested that the film should be a subtitled foreign language film, but rather that it should use the Hollywood convention of accenting characters to indicate foreignness.

This is additionally interesting in the light of the fact that the film occasionally is a foreign-language film. *Beowulf* occasionally switches between modern English and un-subtitled Old

English in scenes with Grendel and Grendel's mother, and uses quotations from the poem performed by the scop in Heorot. Immediately before Justin requested a Swedish accent, Stephen had noted the use of Old English by asking, 'Now was, was the monster speaking old Anglo-Saxon? He sounded like, it wasn't English that he was saying, was it? 'cause I know this is an Anglo Saxon poem, an epic poem, so I wonder if it's original bits from the poem that the Grendel was saying'. Though Robert did not know the language spoken was Old English, he sensed that the foreign-language aspects of the film were historical and authentically so. When asked, 'what parts of it do you think were aiming at historical accuracy then?' his first reply was 'Well then like the bits that were like semi-German'.

*Beowulf* is the only film in this study in which the accent of the actors is mentioned as detracting from historical accuracy. None of the participants commented upon the characters in *Kingdom of Heaven's* accents being historically inaccurate. The accent of all Christian characters in that film (save the Germanic character in Balian's father's entourage) is Received Pronunciation English (hereafter: RP). However, all Christian characters in that film a (except perhaps the final cameo appearance of King Richard I) are French. Participants did not recoil from the RP accents used for French characters because RP has become the conventional way for Hollywood films to denote European historical people. This may also contribute to the overarching expectation that films about the Middle Ages are about English people, and that the Middle Ages are English (as discussed in the previous chapter). Jess even expressed surprise that *Kingdom of Heaven* is about French people at all.

To these participants, making a film in a language other than English inherently makes it seem more historical. However, any regional English accent that they can specifically place, especially from places they perceive not to be medieval (for instance the urban implications of a Cockney or the colonial implications of an American accent) seem historically out of place. Their lack of negative reaction to RP accents may be perhaps because RP is the default for historical films.

### ***Beowulf*: conclusion**

*Beowulf* was generally interpreted by the participants as a medieval film. However, acceptance of what was seen was contingent upon expectations: whether it met their understanding of the *Beowulf* story or whether it coincided with their expectations of the period (and whether the Vikings and Early Middle or 'Dark' Ages are a part of the Middle Ages). They found the CGI off-putting, but explained their dislike in terms of it interfering with their ability to engage with the film, either because they viewed animated films as inherently less realistic or because they saw the CGI itself as an inappropriate way to present a medieval story.

### ***Kingdom of Heaven***

*Kingdom of Heaven* is a different kind of historical film to the others in this study. It is the only historical epic, and the only 'true history' film: that is, one which *purports* to depict real historical people participating in real historical events. It would therefore be reasonable to expect the respondents to be inclined to accept the film as a more valid historical source than the other two. This film uses many tropes of the historical film (such as opening and closing title cards) which position the film both as 'serious' and historically reliable. In spite of this, participants did not believe everything presented to them as true. This section describes the participants' perceptions of the 'realism' and 'medievalness' of the film, their reaction to the character and actor at the centre of the film and also their interpretations of the political allegory central to the film's narrative.

### **Realism**

Respondents felt that *Kingdom of Heaven* adhered closely to their knowledge of the Middle Ages and the Crusades. However, they were split on whether or not the film seemed realistic. As a result, some were unsure whether to believe that what they had seen was a true story. Generally,



the participants responded positively to visual aspects of the film, particularly the material culture, citing them as very realistic and believable. On the other hand, in spite of the fact that this was the only film that portrayed historical figures, they often did not believe that the characters, especially the protagonist, were based on real people. They were also reluctant to accept the plausibility of certain elements of the story. Some found an allegorical truth in the film and related what they saw to the present, which then also caused them to relate their present to the medieval past.

### ***Is Kingdom of Heaven 'medieval'?***

All respondents accepted *Kingdom of Heaven* as a film that broadly conformed to their image of the Middle Ages and thus felt it was an accurate portrayal of the age. However, there was some disagreement as to which of the labels 'medieval' or 'Middle Ages' was more appropriate. Robert labelled this film 'very Middle Ages' but not medieval because 'medieval is less kind of realistic in my head and say this was quite real, earthy, rather than more mythological'. Robert not only saw the film as being a version of the Middle Ages (rather than a medieval film) because it was more realistic, but specifically named 'earthy' as a quality of Middle Ages cinematic realism.

Stephen believed *Kingdom of Heaven* to be realistic because of its genre: '*Beowulf* was going for I think just a general sort of more actiony-adventure type audience thing whereas this one was trying to be a bit more, you know, I'm going to say "real" though I don't know how much of that was truth'. Jake agreed: 'you don't know if these sort of characters existed in real life [...] 'cause there's gotta be bad guys, good guys [...] At the same time I thought the story was quite, it's very believable'. Even though Stephen and Jake are self-consciously aware that they may not know how much of what they saw 'was truth', they perceived it as more realistic due to its generic tropes. Even though they do not know whether the film is telling a true story, something within the film inclines them intuitively to believe that it is.

### **Was *Kingdom of Heaven* considered realistic?**

Participants did not base their judgement of the accuracy of the film on a single overall impression. Instead, they analysed specific elements, weighed the realism of these different aspects individually, and then conflated the results to form a more holistic judgement. Much as in their response to *Beowulf*, they attributed the poor story to a corrupting influence from 'Hollywood'. Justin felt that the tropes of *Kingdom of Heaven* were more realistic than those in *Beowulf*, 'Well, you know, you'd have set pieces that would be destroyed. I mean you had that in this film, but, but [in *Beowulf* was] done in a way that was, that grabbed your attention deliberately and quite obviously like you know having someone run across a bridge and have the bridge fall down and then things like that and then dragons falling down sort of craters. [...] with this one [*Kingdom of Heaven*] it- it- it showed kind of a tactical side on both sides I thought in terms of having a battle and things like that'. *Beowulf's* conventions were unrealistic because of their transparent attempts to grab 'your attention deliberately and quite obviously'. On the other hand, *Kingdom of Heaven's* two-sided portrayal of the battle seemed especially realistic. Justin is a sophisticated movie-viewer, familiar with film conventions which he understands are intended to manipulate his emotions – a familiarity that caused him to recoil from that manipulation.

### **The material culture of *Kingdom of Heaven***

Many felt that the material culture was accurate, but the story hackneyed. Robert said, 'it evoked the period quite well, like the costumes, and it did give you a feel for it. The story, seemed a little, like, clichéd and stereotyped so it didn't, the story itself didn't make it seem very real'.

Participants clearly distinguished between the visual and narrative elements of the film. Beyond this unrealistic visuals often led participants to question the story and vice-versa.

Participants' judgements of the film's historical accuracy were not always based on comparison with their previous knowledge. Sometimes, they seemed to rest on an impression of detail given by the film. For example, Justin admitted he did not know much about the period

depicted by *Kingdom of Heaven*. Nevertheless, when asked if he felt whether it looked realistic he replied, 'I suppose in a way it did, I mean I, I not knowing anything beforehand if somebody came up to me and said "that's what it looked like" then I would believe them, but um, obviously I'm judging this from a movie so, um, uh, I would judge it as being realistic – but as to whether it was real it wouldn't shock me if it wasn't'. Justin maintained suspicion of the film's accuracy, saying that he needed external confirmation to feel confident that what he saw was a valid depiction. In spite of this, he had an intuitive sense that what he saw was 'realistic', even though he had difficulty trusting that it was actually 'real'.

Other participants also believed that the film was highly historically accurate, but had difficulty expressing why they felt this. Unlike *Beowulf*, they felt as though the film benefitted from attention to historical details by the filmmakers. For example Robert said 'I like, personally I felt like they spent a lot of time working on the details of it so, like, I couldn't fault it on that, in my personal thought, they did it quite like, it seemed like quite an important thing for the director to really get all the details right'. Participants were not more specific than this about their sense that *Kingdom of Heaven's* material culture was well represented by the filmmakers, who had thus made the film into a trustworthy visual historical source. As a result it is difficult to know what it was specifically about the costumes or the world that imparted this sense, or whether the impression derived from other aspects of the production.

Many picked out the military material culture as an element which corresponded well with their knowledge of the Middle Ages. Erica felt that 'especially in the battles and stuff all the armour and stuff that seemed what you'd expect'. At first, the film conflicted with Mark's understanding of the Middle Ages as a pre-technological age: 'I didn't know they had siege towers that early, I would have thought [...] that would be a later technological development'. The way Mark phrases this is important; by starting with 'I didn't know' and by using the subjunctive 'I would have thought' (rather than the more assertive 'I don't think' and 'I think that', or similar), this implies that he has judged the film to be a more reliable (or equally reliable) source than his

previous knowledge. This implies his acceptance of information in the film. Dan, Mark and Jake also felt the unconventional depiction of violence was surprisingly believable:

- Dan: I felt the general storyline was very believable, it's something that always irks me in films is when swords, when they cut people to death with swords which just doesn't happen, it sort of glamorises battle a bit where you can die quickly from just like a cutting off the head, whereas actually the swords weren't actually sharp enough and they would have to beat each other to death with them.
- Jake: Same with sort of arrows as well it's like, in that first sort of battle scene when they're in France, it's not like one-shot-kill sort of arrows, sort of situation=
- Mark: =well, one-shot-not-kill especially=
- Jake: =you've got a sharp pointy thing in you, somebody will still fought on, I thought that was quite good sort of. More believable.

The group applies its common sense to these film tropes, and in this case the violation of these tropes is celebrated since the participants perceived that what they saw was more logical than they expected. In this way, film tropes can sometimes be self-defeating; sophisticated film viewers can understand them to be unrealistic and celebrate diversions from them, so long as those diversions seem sensible.

### **Cinematography of battle scenes and realism**

Stephen and Justin felt the cinematographic style of the battle scenes made the film more realistic.

- Stephen: I do think you get a sense of the melee though, which was the kind of=
- Justin: =the chaos of melee=
- Stephen: =you're not seeing it all you just see sort of chaos around you, that you see some people that you don't know who's, who's hand's just been hacked off whether it's a, you know whether it's a Muslim or a Christian and who's the kind of fray of the battle you can't really see what's going on. [...] I suppose that's where the realism came from. The fact that it's right down on the actual ground level of the troops, close-up in the battle.
- Justin: But you're not hiding the fact that this was a quite a horrible thing for individuals to kind of have to go through.

For many of its battle scenes (most particularly the large melees after the cavalry charge at Castle Kerak and the battle in the breach at the conclusion of the siege of Jerusalem), *Kingdom of Heaven*

relies upon a recently-adopted technique of shooting battle scenes. This technique employs extreme close-ups, hand-held camera work, first-person perspective shots, and an alternation between quick cuts, fast-forward and slow motion in order to portray the disorientation and chaos of the melee. This technique for filming fight scenes has become common in recent years, employed by a variety of films across genres. These films include *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Bourne Trilogy*, and the recent revisions of the *Batman* and *James Bond* franchises.<sup>360</sup> The technique differs markedly from the classical way of depicting battle (as seen in *Beowulf*, *The Lord of the Rings* and a few of the other battles in *Kingdom of Heaven*), where the audience is shown the faces and bodies of the combatants, typically from medium-shot. As a result, in this new approach the audience is not shown the fighting prowess of the characters and often the resulting disorientation means that it is impossible to understand what has happened until it is over. Body parts and weapons become disassociated from their owners and the result of combat is only made clear when the fog of the melee lifts and classical cinematographic technique resumes. In *Kingdom of Heaven*, the use of this technique has a didactic purpose; the glory of war and the pleasure in viewing individual fighting prowess is de-emphasised because (as quoted above) the audience does not even 'know whether it's a Muslim or a Christian' that it sees. The 'gruesome', 'chaotic', 'madness' of war is emphasised and becomes central to the overall message of the film: war itself is the true antagonist.

Overall, participants responded positively to what they felt were breaks with Hollywood generic tropes (in which death by sword or arrow is often quick and bloodless in an attempt to minimise the violence and thus avoid censorship) in favour of a more violent, chaotic, less 'Hollywood', and to them, more realistic vision of medieval war. All of these things contributed to a sense that *Kingdom of Heaven*, especially in its depiction of medieval warfare, was a very

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<sup>360</sup> Stephen Spielberg, *Saving Private Ryan* (DreamWorks, 1998); Doug Liman, *The Bourne Identity* (Universal Studios, 2002); Christopher Nolan, *Batman Begins* (Warner Brothers, 2005); Martin Campbell, *Casino Royale* (Columbia Pictures, 2006).

trustworthy source for historical knowledge about the material culture of the Crusades, and an appropriate source from which to learn.

### **Kingdom of Heaven: 'Based on a True Story'?**

Many characters in *Kingdom of Heaven* are based upon real people. Balian of Ibelin, Guy de Lusignan, Reynald de Chatillon, Count Raymond III of Tripoli, Count Raymond of Tiberias, Princess (and later Queen) Sibylla of Jerusalem, King Baldwin IV of Jerusalem, Saladin, Imad-Ad-Din and Richard I of England are all based on historical persons. However, participants in this research probably were not aware that most of them were real (with the exception of Richard I and Saladin). Often there is no way for a viewer of historical film to be certain which of the characters are real and which were invented by the filmmakers. Moreover, in some regard, all characters in all fiction films are inventions of filmmakers, whether based on a real person or not. However, portraying a person who actually existed rather than a fabrication (or an amalgamation of various real people) says to the viewer that what they see is a story that should be believed to have *literally* happened, rather than one which only *might* have happened, or did not happen at all. Purporting to be based on a true story pushes the expectation of historical authenticity and realism for *Kingdom of Heaven* higher than it was for *Beowulf*. When *Beowulf* had only to seem realistic (in an archetypal or iconic way), *Kingdom of Heaven* had to seem *real*.

Believing that the characters on screen were real people was central to some participants' beliefs that the story is true. For example, Katy felt that she was better able to believe the story and empathise with the characters in this film because *Kingdom of Heaven*, unlike *Beowulf*, portrayed real people. 'I think the majority of it was realistic. Um, and, I thought a bit easier, because there was no mystical mythical characters in it, it was all very, human. [...] you could kind of, not sympathise but, see the reality of it'.

### **The protagonist**

Even though some expressed more of an inclination to believe in the characters than *Beowulf*, many questioned whether the protagonist, Balian, and his story were real. Balian of Ibelin was a real person (and Ibelin a real place). However, the real Balian of Ibelin was significantly different from how he is portrayed in *Kingdom of Heaven*. In order to elicit empathy from the audience and add drama to his journey, Balian is presented in *Kingdom of Heaven* as a blacksmith who attains power and prestige after taking the crusade. This fits with a typical 'rags to riches' narrative, and counterpoints Balian's moral nobility as a commoner against his aristocratic rivals. The real Balian was born a nobleman in the Holy Land who inherited the lordship of Ibelin from his brother, Baldwin. The filmmaker cast the youthful Orlando Bloom in the role and engineered a romantic tryst between himself and Princess Sybilla of Jerusalem. However, during the events portrayed by the film, the real Balian was in his fifties, and married with four children. Unlike the film, Balian's family were not unwavering supporters of the King of Jerusalem, while during the siege of Jerusalem Balian is reported to have worked closely with the patriarch of Jerusalem, rather than having the contentious relationship depicted in the film. The historical Balian did fight in the Battle of Hattin, but escaped with his life and fled back to Jerusalem, whereas Balian in the film abstains from the battle as a conscientious objector. With that having been said, the real Balian of Ibelin did perform some of the heroic deeds depicted in *Kingdom of Heaven*: he led the garrison of Jerusalem to a stalemate with Saladin's vastly superior force, knighted sixty of the burgesses of the city in one day, and successfully negotiated the surrender of Jerusalem (in which most of the citizens were allowed to buy their freedom in order to avoid being taken as slaves by the Saracens). Beyond this, for historical purposes, achieving a clear view of the character of Balian of Ibelin becomes difficult, because accounts of his life in different chronicles conflict with each other

due to the differing political allegiances of their authors. As a result, the medieval accounts (perhaps not unlike historical films) typically paint an unrealistically heroic or villainous portrait.<sup>361</sup>

Participants often questioned whether Balian was a real person, for two reasons. First, there was a perception that the hero's journey was unrealistic. This is unsurprising considering the extent to which the story focuses on his literal and psychological journeys. His geographical journey takes him from France to the Holy Land and back; his psychological journey is from the perspective of a jaded Christian seeking absolution to a victorious hero who has embraced secular humanism. The Crusades are only the backdrop and facilitator of his personal quest. The second criticism levelled against the depiction of Balian was in the common perception that Orlando Bloom was not an appropriate actor to play a medieval hero.

### **Balian's journeys**

Many participants cited the protagonist's character arc as unrealistic. Over the course of the film, Balian rises from an unknown blacksmith to be the Baron of Ibelin, commander of the garrison of the city of Jerusalem and lover of the Queen of the Kingdom of Jerusalem.<sup>362</sup> Many participants reacted negatively to this. Mark said, 'I'm a little sceptical about the sort of, I'm not quite sure what the timescale of the movie was but, blacksmith to at one point ruler over Jerusalem, I'm a little sceptical'. Erica echoed this. 'Orlando Bloom he was like, not a wuss, but was like, happy little blacksmith doing his own thing, and then all of a sudden he was like yeah, this massive big,

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<sup>361</sup> For medieval sources on Balian of Ibelin, see: William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*, Records of Civilization, Sources and Studies, 35 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943); *La Continuation De Guillaume De Tyr, 1184-1197*, Documents Relatifs à l'Histoire Des Croisades, 14 (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste P. Geuthner, 1982); *The Conquest of Jerusalem and the Third Crusade: Sources in Translation* (Brookfield, VT: Scolar Press, 1996).

<sup>362</sup> In the extended 'director's cut' version of the film, in France Balian is shown to have been a siege master as well as a blacksmith. The companion guide to the history behind the film calls him "'an artificer," as Scott describes him, who in another era would be a talented engineer'. This makes his use of sophisticated anti-siege tactics (such as range-markers and counterweighted *ballistae*) during the siege of Jerusalem more plausible. However, participants were shown the theatrical release of the film in which his previous experience with siege technology is never made clear. As a result, they saw the character arc of the hero as abrupt and unrealistic. Ridley Scott, Diana Landau and Nancy Friedman, *Kingdom of Heaven: The Ridley Scott Film and the History Behind the Story* (London: Newmarket Press, 2005), p. 17.



like, knight, and he knew everything—this seemed a bit unbelievable.’ Justin, Sean and Stephen cited this as a reason not to believe Balian of Ibelin to have been a real person:

- Justin: I think Orlando Bloom’s character might not have been real.  
 Sean: [Yeah I thought he was just like a smith and then became this amazing warrior  
 Justin: Yeah he was just used as a kind of]  
 Stephen: It was kind of a stylised I suppose like Shakespeare did with Henry the Fifth that kind of this big heroic leader that’s gonna lead Jerusalem to... surrender. (laugh) But no, um  
 Justin: It was kin- almost, almost a rags-to-riches thing you know

This specific aspect of the hero’s character arc may have provoked such a negative reaction because of the participants’ preconceived understanding that the Middle Ages were a time of little social mobility, clear class structure and a notably large gulf between the rich and poor. To them, heroism has a class component; any peasant rising to the level of the heroic nobility requires explanation. The filmmakers explain this rise in ranks as a feature of the Holy Land as a land of opportunity. Godfrey educates his son Balian to the possibilities for advancement that the Holy Land presents: ‘Do you know... what lies in the Holy Land? A new world. A man who in France had not a house is, in the Holy Land, the master of a city. He who was the master of a city, begs in the gutter. There, at the end of the world you are not what you are born, but what you have it in yourself to be’. Part of the opening title card presents Jerusalem similarly: ‘Europe suffers in the grip of repression and poverty. / Peasant and lord alike flee to the Holy Land in search of fortune or salvation’. However, these statements in the film did not seem sufficient to overcome the participants’ perception that this was improbable. Though ‘rags to riches’ narratives are common in many films (and form a common narrative trope for American self-definition as ‘the American dream’), its inclusion in a film depicting the Middle Ages provoked the negative reactions witnessed. Overall, it did not cause participants to revise their previous ideas about the rigid class structure of the medieval period.

### **Star system and sex symbols**

Orlando Bloom in the film's lead role made participants in two of the groups less inclined to believe the character to have been real, because Bloom did not fit their preconceived ideas of a medieval leader. Indeed, participants seemed focused upon the actor rather than the character he was playing. During discussions participants used the name of the character very infrequently, instead spontaneously referring to Balian as 'Orlando Bloom's character'. Occasionally they substituted the actor for the character entirely, as in Erica's statement 'when right at the beginning where Orlando Bloom's wife got her head chopped off'. Within this study this is unique: the protagonists of *Beowulf* and *The Return of the King* were almost always referred to by the name of the character rather than the actors who play them—even though Orlando Bloom appeared in *Return of the King* as Legolas.

Participants disliked the fact that they were able to recognise the actor playing the leading role. For example, Katy felt the casting of Orlando Bloom was a marketing ploy on the part of the filmmaker, especially as the sexual object for a heterosexual female gaze: 'Orlando Bloom, a character like that using an actor like that is probably kind of a ploy to get people to watch it [...] it kind of forced them to watch it because well, particularly females liked it'. Stephen concurred. 'I think that's why we didn't necessarily believe it or respond well because we're kind of aware that he's in there as the star [...] and he's kind of there to draw people in to watch the film'. Others agreed, saying their dislike 'could be just that he's a huge star' and that they were distracted by recognising him in a previous role: 'Oh that's Legolas [from *The Lord of the Rings* films]!' Participants seemed hyper-aware that they were watching a star in the lead role, and again bristled at what they perceived to be another attempted manipulation by Hollywood.

Dislike of Orlando Bloom was not merely because he was a well-known star. Stephen cited Bloom's androgynous aspect as a reason for disliking him in the role: 'Orlando Bloom is known, is known as a celebrity and a bit of a dish'; he is 'a little bit too glossy' and also, 'you see Orlando Bloom and you make a snap decision that he's a pretty boy'. The last two words, 'pretty' and 'boy' are of equal importance; his perceived appeal to a heterosexual female or homosexual

male audience, and also his youthfulness both detract from his perceived appropriateness as the lead in *Kingdom of Heaven*.<sup>363</sup> When asked what actor would be more appropriate to play the role, Justin said ‘Liam Neeson [who plays Balian’s father] was a bit more kind of the look I thought, of that kind of character’. In comparison to Neeson, participants saw Bloom as either too young or immature. Stephen said ‘I think a big part of it is age’, and that an appropriate hero should have ‘silver hair’. Edward Norton’s depiction of King Baldwin IV, to them, had gravitas because of the handicap provided by his leprosy. To Sean, the ailment lent him ‘maturity’. Balian was criticised, by comparison, for acting ‘naïve’ and ‘youthful’.

This treatment of Orlando Bloom in this film is similar in some ways to the reaction of heterosexual males to 1920s film star Rudolph Valentino, famous for his portrayal of a number of highly sexualised ‘latin lovers’. As Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin recount, ‘While multitudes of female fans actively worshipped him, some male moviegoers grew antagonistic towards him, partly because he was competition for their women’s attention, but also because Valentino’s objectified star image was uncomfortably close to the objectified star images of female bodies. He was deemed too pretty. Men weren’t supposed to pose like that! Male newspaper columnists began to smear Valentino’s masculinity by suggesting he was effeminate’.<sup>364</sup>

Interestingly, there may also be a biological component to the perception that Orlando Bloom’s youth and feminine features make him less appropriate to play a medieval hero. Recent research at the Schools of Psychology at Aberdeen and Stirling Universities has found a significant correlation between masculinity and desirability specific to societies with low overall health. They found that masculine facial features were more desirable than feminine facial features in societies with poor health, whereas in healthier societies, feminine features were more desirable. They report,

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<sup>363</sup> The phenomenon of the ‘pretty boy’ in popular culture also has a long history in Japanese culture as the figure of the Bishōnen (literally ‘beautiful boy’), a beautiful, androgynous, highly sexualised young male. However, unlike the common western perception of the ‘pretty boy’ type being ineffectual, effete and weak, Bishōnen commonly are often depicted with extreme sport or martial arts prowess. *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Japanese Culture*, ed. by Sandra Buckley (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 45-46.

<sup>364</sup> Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies*, 2nd edn (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 255.

Across 30 countries, masculinity preference increased as health decreased. This relationship was independent of cross-cultural differences in wealth or women's mating strategies. These findings show non-arbitrary cross-cultural differences in facial attractiveness judgements.<sup>365</sup>

It is possible that this phenomenon may play a part in the formulation of the expectation that appropriately attractive medieval men have very masculine features, since the Middle Ages are commonly understood to be a time featuring poor health and poverty. More must be done to test this hypothesis.

### **Gravitas**

We have seen that for many of the participants, Orlando Bloom did not fit the image of what the protagonist of a medieval or historical war film should be. Participants saw homosocial leadership in war as paramount in the qualities of a medieval hero. As Carin said, 'I don't believe like, when all the men are like following him and stuff, I just, I don't, I wouldn't follow him [...] I just I don't think he's a very good actor and he's just, I don't think he's your typical kind of... I don't know, just seemed a bit... wimpy'. Some participants saw Orlando Bloom as inadequate for the role because his voice or demeanour lacked 'gravitas' or 'power'. When questioned, Stephen said the main problem was Orlando Bloom's lack of gravitas: 'it could be because of the context of having a great leader leading people into battle is quite a medieval thing. Well, historical, maybe not exclusive of medieval, but it's not, you don't need gravitas in *Pretty Woman*',<sup>366</sup> and 'I just wasn't really buying Orlando Bloom when he was doing the speeches and things [...] [he] doesn't have the voice for it, he doesn't have the gravitas for it'. Justin pointed this out as well, 'I think the reason he couldn't pull it off is that he didn't have the look really, he seemed a bit too, [he] didn't

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<sup>365</sup> L. M. DeBruine and others, 'The Health of a Nation Predicts Their Mate Preferences: Cross-Cultural Variation in Women's Preferences for Masculinized Male Faces', *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 277 (2010), 2405-2410.

<sup>366</sup> This reference is in relation to Justin and Stephen's statement that Richard Gere, though silver-haired, would not have the appropriate gravitas to play a medieval hero. Stephen postulated this is 'because we haven't seen him in a suitable role'. Obviously these participants have not seen *First Knight*, in which Gere is cast as Lancelot. It is unknown whether they would revise their opinion after having seen the film. Jerry Zucker, *First Knight* (Sony Pictures, 1997).

seem to have the power behind him to suggest that he could lead people'. The companion book to the film indicates that the filmmakers also felt a mature voice was important for the depiction of the character: 'Bloom's preparation required a great deal of physical training [...] Vocal training was also part of the package: Scott wanted him to use a deeper, more mature voice for Balian'.<sup>367</sup> Unfortunately this seems to have been insufficient to satisfy the participants.

To these participants there was a certain 'type' which is visual shorthand for a war-leader, either in a broad historical sense or a specifically medieval sense, and most felt that Orlando Bloom did not fit this. Bloom was too well known, and as a result they found his public image and his previous roles distracting. He did not have the 'gravitas' that age or maturity would lend, or the masculinity that would make him a more appropriate medieval war hero. In sum, to these participants, medieval heroes were not 'pretty boys'.

### **Does *Kingdom of Heaven's* political allegory make it more or less believable as a representation of the Middle Ages?**

As discussed in chapter 4, *Kingdom of Heaven* centres on an interpretation of the Crusades as an allegorical precedent to contemporary conflicts in the Middle East. The narrative of the film can be interpreted as a parable in which the Crusades, and by extension all religiously-motivated war, is regarded as morally bankrupt.

This allegorical interpretation of the film begs the question whether or not participants interpreted the film in the same way. Were the politics of the film noticed? If so were they regarded positively or negatively or were they accepted without questioning? Did the politics of the film affect participants' overall interpretation of the film? Did they feel that allegorising the Crusades made the film more or less believable?

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<sup>367</sup> Scott, Landau and Friedman, p. 68.

### **Did they believe the allegory of *Kingdom of Heaven* reflected historical truth?**

Many participants easily identified the message in the film, though they did not necessarily see the film as didactic. When asked if he had learned anything from the film, Mark reported that 'I did learn a bit about Christians and Muslims living side-by-side in Jerusalem in that period. But, that's entirely believable'. Stephen pointed to the pacifist parable in the film: 'I think the goodie baddie divide in the film came from those who wanted peace and coexistence, Leper King, Orlando Bloom, and those who wanted war such as Guy and, um, Saladin'.<sup>368</sup> Jess responded positively to this division indicating this made the film more realistic, 'I thought it was good the way there were lots of sort of goodies and baddies on sort of both sides, it wasn't sort of, like, one-sided film [...] I thought it made it realer'. Sean agreed, 'I think it did quite a good job of not splitting up Christians versus Saracens and it wasn't like Christians are goodies Saracens are baddies, as is often done. I thought it was quite good'. Jake also enjoyed the moral divide not being defined by religion: 'I liked the way he [Saladin] sort of, he wasn't like, didn't do the obvious thing of sort of making him the bad guy and, like, the army of Jerusalem and everybody are the good team [...] kinda questioned like people's like morals and things'. Jake had the perception that the default position a representation of the Crusades would take would be one in which the Christians are the protagonists and the Muslims the antagonists or vice-versa.

When asked whether the division of good and bad in the film along the lines of pacifism and warmongering was believable, Justin replied

I think it probably is. I think that makes it more believable, [...]because you know that in a situation like that not everyone is going to have that sort of full belief that you're going to go along with the zeitgeist. [...] I think that if you're putting across the idea that everyone was happy with this, you know, and everyone wants to go fight the opposition, the opposition wants to go fight you and everybody wants to, then it's just becoming kind of a

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<sup>368</sup> Stephen is here incorrect in his labelling of Saladin as being depicted as someone who was a 'baddie' and who 'wanted to make war'. Immediately afterwards both Sean and Justin questioned this statement. Sean then recanted, saying Saladin 'was a bit of a mysterious character'. Stephen's original interpretation (or slip of the tongue) puts him in line with some traditional depictions of Saladin, like DeMille's *The Crusades* (1935). For a further examination of the character of Saladin as depicted in cinema and television, see Lorraine K. Stock, 'Now Starring in the Third Crusade: Depictions of Richard I and Saladin in Films and Television Series', in *Hollywood in the Holy Land: Essays on Film Depictions of the Crusades and Christian-Muslim Clashes*, ed. by Nickolas Haydock and Edward L. Ridsden (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), pp. 93-122.

sullied them versus them, good versus evil type thing rather than if you show them within a society that they've got sort of people wanting different aspirations then you're putting across a bit more of a human thing.

Justin here took a postmodern approach; to him a perceived a traditional 'good versus evil' approach to the Crusades would be 'sullied' and less 'human'. He preferred a vision of the Crusades in which the movement is shown to be made up of individuals with differing motivations and levels of commitment to the cause.

At first, Stephen was one of the few to disagree with the assessment that this was realistic. He felt that the pacifist message did not necessarily fit with his knowledge of the Crusades. However, he felt the film was presented realistically enough for this narrative to be negotiated as a new nuance: 'it did seem more in my opinion of the Crusades as being about sort of people really fighting for their religion, but there is, it did show that there is an element of people who just want power and just want, you just want war essentially'. Stephen balked at the degree to which the Crusades were depicted to have been motivated by secular concerns:

I expected that in any war it's gonna be people manipulating people's feelings and manipulating people's religions for the sake of power but to the extent that it was shown in the film it didn't seem as though anyone was really fighting for their religion. It was either the, the people who had the lust for power or in the case of the people who wanted peace, they were fighting for humanity, they were being humanists, they wanted, you know, they wanted both sides to be able to coexist, there didn't seem to be a strong ideological thrust from either ... either side that we've got to keep this city for our religion.

However, Stephen's preconceptions of the Crusades as being fought by individuals motivated by religion was ultimately trumped by what he regarded as a more realistic assessment presented by *Kingdom of Heaven*. When asked if the depiction as he described above was realistic, he said, 'I imagine so, yeah. I suppose it's, it is kind of religion is kind of used as a, um, as a camouflage for people's desire to make war'. So here, Stephen shows his cognitive dissonance in his interpretation of the film; he recoiled from the idea that no one during the Crusades was motivated by piety, but also agreed with the overall principle that religion is sometimes used to make war.

It may have been the film's resonances with contemporary conflicts (as discussed in chapter 4) which were the source of participants' resistance to a traditional 'good versus evil' narrative. It is these connections to contemporary conflict which necessitates a different kind of identification scheme lest it seem 'sullied' or 'not human'. Contemporary liberal culture seeks to bridge the gap between the West and the Middle Eastern 'other'; any cultural product which does not fit into the grand narratives prevalent within contemporary political discourse runs the risk of being regarded as reactionary or even racist.

### **Did participants relate the conflicts seen in the film to current conflicts?**

The interview questions did not ask about contemporary political implications of the film, since to have done so would imply to the participants that such an interpretation was important (whereas the research was intended to allow participants to define what was important for themselves). Only the June focus group spontaneously raised this issue after viewing *Kingdom of Heaven* (which followed up on their pre-film discussion in which the political relationship between the Crusades and current conflicts in the Middle East also arose). The four members of this group did not see the film's message as hindering it as a representation of history; often the message of the film seemed to coincide with their political ideology and expectations. It appeared that members of the group were projecting their understanding of the contemporary world onto the Crusades, and used the film as a support for the links they were already inclined to draw.

For example, Stephen viewed current conflicts in terms of *realpolitik*. This fits with the viewpoint of the film: 'at the end of the day it is probably still motivated by people, on both sides, who are hungry for power'. Katy agreed, saying 'I agree that um, it's about power, a lot of it is about power [...] I think it is, they think they're trying to show power by imposing their religious views on the world'. When asked whether she was speaking about the film, the Crusades or the conflicts today, Katy said 'Both Crusades battle and movie and what's going on now as well, I think all about imposing a set of beliefs that you believe to be true and unquestionable on the rest of



the world to save the world'. So, to Katy and Stephen, the fundamental interpretation of conflict as a result of the desire for power is a link that can be drawn between past and present, and between history and *Kingdom of Heaven*.

Justin did not believe that all of the aspects of the Crusades depicted in the film coincided with his understanding of present-day conflicts. He defined the difference based upon who he regarded as the aggressor; 'But it's very much from a, it's a diff- it's kind of an exchange now though isn't it [...] in the past it was the Christians putting their beliefs across on the [...] you know the Muslims, but now you've got very few but they do exist, fundamentalists that are generally going up against Christianity'. Justin believed that the Crusades were an aggressive act by the Christians whereas the current conflicts are due to the aggression of Muslim fundamentalists. Stephen also felt that whereas the Crusades, as presented in the film, were solely about control of a city, current conflicts in the Middle East have a different focus, 'it's not about control of a particular city, it's about that they think that the world should be'.

It is difficult to discuss with confidence the reasons the participants in the other groups did not discuss the political implications of the film, since a lack of evidence can say only so much. That being said, it is interesting to note how little most participants viewed the film allegorically. This is in spite of the fact that the film presents itself in this way explicitly. Even after having just seen the final title card: 'Nearly a thousand years later, peace in the Kingdom of Heaven remains elusive', most participants seemed unwilling to relate the film to modern politics, or did not feel this was an important area of discussion.

### **Ideas of the Arab world**

Participants related what they saw in the film to their own knowledge<sup>369</sup> of the Arab world, both medieval and contemporary. As already mentioned, many regarded the film as a positive challenge to a tradition which dictates that Christians should be depicted heroically and Muslims

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<sup>369</sup> Though some of the following statements about the Arab world might more accurately be called 'prejudices', for reasons given at the start of the chapter I will use the more neutral term 'knowledge'.

as the enemy. For example, Mark forcefully praised the depiction of Saladin, the Muslim ruler, 'I'm glad they didn't display the Salah-ad-Din as a bloodthirsty murderer, because that would have just been completely untrue'. Saladin is an interesting figure in the discussion of the stereotypical depiction of middle easterners in Western culture. In the above example Mark suggests the film's depiction of Saladin was meant to subvert cultural prejudices, which in his mind would necessitate casting the middle easterners in a negative light. However, Saladin has more usually been depicted in popular culture, particularly since Sir Walter Scott's *The Talisman* (1825), as 'the only noble enemy' of the Crusades. Mark was likely not aware of this, as he seemed to take pride in his preconception that Saladin was not 'a bloodthirsty murderer'. However, Saladin's depiction in *Kingdom of Heaven* is not especially subversive of cultural stereotypes since he is commonly viewed in this way (and, ironically, a portrayal in which he is viewed in a negative light might be more subversive).

Erica saw the scene where Balian assists his serfs in the building of a well as a timeless one: 'I thought like the bit where Orlando Bloom went to visit his like new plot of land and they built the well and stuff, that could have been done at any time. I didn't really see the middle-agey, medievalness in that like, couple of scenes. That could have been shot in any time, any place'. She further justifies this assertion by saying 'that just seemed like it could have [been] done yesterday cause the clothes and everything, I didn't really think as being medieval'. Erica's perception of the universality of the scene is based on a specific (incorrect) belief that Arabic clothing has not changed significantly since the Crusades. Her assertion that 'it could have [been] done yesterday' may also imply that she sees the medieval Middle East similarly to a contemporary impoverished country in need of water aid as depicted on commercials for charitable organisations in the UK.

### **Guerrilla crusades?**

Participants often thought that the Crusades were fought similarly to modern conflicts. For example, Justin said that *Kingdom of Heaven* differed from his preconceptions of the Muslims

during the Crusades. He said of the Muslims 'I didn't expect the opposition side to have such a strong force for them. I didn't expect them to be like that, I thought it would be kind of much more, as I said like more of a guerrilla type warfare, just kind of a population resistance rather than an army resistance'. Justin subsequently admitted that this perception was a projection of his view of the present onto the past: 'I suppose this is maybe looking at it in the same way as I'm seeing the war in Iraq at the moment. [...] I suppose it's because America's just gone in there and just, you know, invaded them but I mean, that's the way I saw that the Crusades would be, I didn't expect them to be two big armies against each other'. Justin instinctually related the war in Iraq and the Crusades (though he seemed uncomfortable with this instinct): he saw the Americans as similar to the crusaders, and as a result expected the Muslims at the time of the Crusades to be analogous to the Iraqi insurgency. Katy also expected asymmetry between the forces of the crusaders and the Muslims, 'I just always, whenever crusade comes up I just always think of that and weak and strong kind of armies'. Justin and Stephen went even further, exploring their ideas about the medieval Islamic world:

Justin: In a way, I didn't expect that, which is why I wasn't really sure about there being two big armies because I assumed that, um, I wasn't, I mean not knowing anything about, um, Jerusalem back then I didn't realise that, as a culture, you know, because Britain's always been very much, especially in the past has always been very much, you know, as an, advanced. I mean, I don't want to say advanced, do you know what I mean? It's been on the, on [the developed side of things

Stephen: E-e-even though,] even though I know in my head that around that period the Islamic world was the centre of learning pretty much, but you know a lot of mathematics and stuff comes from that period, for some reason maybe it's, you know, some, some gut feeling some gut, um thing that's been instilled in me from somewhere from some book from some film from some TV programme or whatever, I, I agree with you that you don't think of them as civilised.

Justin: I don't, I don't think it's un, I don't think that they're uncivilised they're just, I don't think of them as being

Stephen: =sop—sophisticated [is the word

Justin: Yeah,] sorry [sophisticated.

Even though Justin and Stephen had learned that the Islamic world was, in many ways, more culturally and technologically advanced than Christendom during the Crusades, they simultaneously held the contradictory perception that the medieval Islamic world was not 'sophisticated'. They had difficulty negotiating a compromise between these two conflicting ideas and did not come to a satisfactory reconciliation during the course of the focus group. They also held a nationalistic idea that, by contrast with the Middle East, Britain has always been an 'advanced' or 'developed' society. This is very arguably not the case, though it would be difficult to devise an objective datum by which to measure the relative advancement or development of a nation or culture.

*Kingdom of Heaven* has shown these two participants a powerful and sophisticated Islamic world that contrasted with their assumptions, and this interchange shows the potential of film to cause individuals to challenge their own preconceptions. However, it is appropriate to be cautious about this. Firstly, these participants never came to a clear conclusion on which idea to believe. Secondly, the political allegory in *Kingdom of Heaven* was only noted here because it presented a similarity between modern and medieval that was *less* obvious than they thought. None of the participants directly cited the film in helping them to draw the link between medieval crusades and the war in Iraq because participants considered that the Crusades were *more* like the war in Iraq than the film depicted, rather than less. As a result, the allegory in the film seems natural, even not going far enough. Thus, this film possibly reinforced their ideas that the Crusades and current conflicts in the Middle East are related or similar, even if it may have shown them a more nuanced view than they already held.

**Conclusion: *Kingdom of Heaven***

In sum, most participants felt that *Kingdom of Heaven* was very medieval and also very realistic, particularly citing its detailed reproduction of material culture and its gritty depictions of medieval warfare to justify this claim. However they reacted less positively to the character and actor at the

centre of the film. Balian's story was often judged too formulaic to be real, which led some to question whether Balian was historical. Orlando Bloom was universally panned as an inappropriate actor to play the hero in this film due to him contradicting a common understanding of the physical presence, maturity and 'gravitas' required of medieval man. Finally, some participants were surprised by the depiction of the medieval Muslim world as a culture able to raise armies and resist Crusader incursion. For them, the film was not surprising due to its political allegory which links the Crusades with modern conflicts, but quite the reverse—it was surprising to them because of how *different* the Crusades seemed to be from the modern world.

### ***The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King***

As noted, *The Return of the King* is unique amongst the films in this study because it is the least directly related to the Middle Ages. It is neither the product of a medieval imagination (like *Beowulf*) nor does it purport to depict real people participating in medieval history (such as *Kingdom of Heaven*). Rather, *The Lord of the Rings* films are based on a trilogy of novels which are a prime example of medievalist fantasy. Whereas the poem *Beowulf* would be considered medieval fantasy (since it is a fantasy itself from the Middle Ages), *The Lord of the Rings* is a work of medievalism: a set of novels, though, in many ways recognisably medieval, that was created after the Middle Ages. So, for lack of a better word I differentiate it from *Beowulf* by using the adjective *medievalist* fantasy.<sup>370</sup>

Unlike the medieval fantasy of *Beowulf* (or most medieval fantasies), *The Lord of the Rings* is set in a world other than our own. Middle-Earth, though it bears many comparisons with our world, is not our world.<sup>371</sup> As discussed in chapter 5, *The Lord of the Rings* is recognisably medieval

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<sup>370</sup> This term seems apropos as well since medievalist (when used as a noun) describes a person who studies the Middle Ages, either professionally or casually (or both). As a result, the medievalist, and the work of medievalist fiction, both are undertaking a similar enterprise: reinventing the Middle Ages for contemporary consumption.

<sup>371</sup> Tolkien occasionally asserted that *Lord of the Rings* is a fantastical pre-history to our own world. 'The theatre of my tale is this earth, the one in which we now live, but the historical period is imaginary'. While this may have been the author's intention (perhaps as a tongue-in-cheek reference to the lost vast swathes

in flavour, both in its material and social culture, in its similarity to medieval literature, and in the languages used by the characters.<sup>372</sup> However, to what degree did participants see this connection between fantasy and real history? Did participants view *Return of the King* as recognisably medieval? And if they did, did they rely upon their historical knowledge when interpreting the film, or learn any new information about the Middle Ages from this fantasy? This section will address the influence of participants' previous experience with the novels and films on their interpretation of *Return of the King*. It will also pose the complex question which concerns the degree to which participants felt that *Return of the King* could be considered 'medieval'.

### **How did previous experience with the books and films influence their interpretation?**

Many of the participants expressed familiarity with the books on which *Return of the King* is based. Also, all of those who had read the books had seen the films previously. Some who had not read the books had seen some or all of the films. While there were no clear indications that previous viewing influenced their interpretation in the focus group, previous experience with the novels did affect their interpretations.

Some participants were self-described 'fans' of the series. For example, in the May group, Carin said she was 'a big Lord of the Rings fan', both 'the books and... the films'. As a result, she occasionally placed herself as an authority on the interpretation of the film. In the June group, Sean and Justin both said they had read the books, and Sean often referred to his knowledge of the books during the discussion.

However, some participants used the social authority provided by knowledge of the book to make points about the film which were actually unsupported by the novel. Justin used his memory of the books to bolster his theory that Gondor was not medieval because it did not have

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of humanity's pre-history), to the casual reader (and viewer), Tolkien seems to be building a world entirely unlike and separate from our own. Tolkien, pp. 220, 239.

<sup>372</sup> In the books (and also in the films), the Rohirrim are noted for speaking Old English and having a culture similar to the Anglo-Saxons. However, some scholars have drawn apt comparisons between the Rohirrim and the Germanic tribes described by Tacitus as well. Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, 'Myth, Late Roman History, and Multiculturalism in Tolkien's Middle-Earth', in *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth*, ed. by Jane Chance (Lexington-Fayette, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), pp. 101-118.

knights. 'I don't think, I don't think in the books I ever heard the word knight'. Stephen followed with 'Yeah it's just soldier I suppose'. The word 'knight' is used in the books, whereas the more modern 'soldier' is not.<sup>373</sup> Sean also misremembered the book in order to support his theory that Gandalf's character is not a character of power but of knowledge 'In the books there's even less wizardry, I think. And like even the bits on the fields where all the horses trying to go back into the city, he has the ray of light comes out, that doesn't happen in the book or anything like that. Um, so yeah, I think he might just be more sort of the guy who knows what's going on'. Sean has misremembered the book; that episode does occur in the novel. The June focus group's familiarity with the historical provenance of *Lord of the Rings* (as a twentieth-century medievalist fantasy) made participants reluctant to label *Return of the King* as a work of medieval fantasy. Stephen postulated:

I wonder if some of the fact that we don't see it as a medieval fantasy comes from the fact that it was written, it wasn't written then, or it doesn't directly originate from then. That it's a quite modern, suppose it's a modern view, well, relatively modern view of, what a medieval fantasy is. We kind of don't accept it as authentic because, because of that, because it's writing hundreds of years after the medieval period.

Unlike *Beowulf*, the participants who had previous experience with *The Lord of the Rings* novels did not criticise the film as a poor rendition of the book. This may have been a result of the fact that, as a piece of popular fiction, *The Lord of the Rings* would not have been taught to them in school, (and as such an interpretive scheme would not have been provided by a teacher with which the film could contradict, as in Erica's experience with *Beowulf*). Alternatively, it is possible that this indicates that the participants felt that the film was a relatively faithful interpretation of the novels. This would fit with the way in which the films were marketed to fans of Tolkien's work. However, within the context of the focus group, those who had read the novels seemed to regard this as conferring authority on themselves when it came to interpretation of the films. This

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<sup>373</sup> The word 'knight' is never used to refer to the mounted warriors of Rohan but is used occasionally in *Return of the King* to refer to the mounted warriors of the principality of Dol Amroth in the kingdom of Gondor. The knights of Dol Amroth are not explicitly depicted in the film of *Return of the King*, though it is possible the heavily-armoured horsemen who ride out with Faramir in order to retake Osgiliath are meant to represent them. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 50th Anniversary Paperback edn (London: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 771.

indicates that there remains a sense that the novel, as the source for the film, is the ‘true story’, against which the film must be measured. This is similar to the interpretive frameworks of those familiar with the *Beowulf* story.

### **Is *Return of the King* medieval?**

As would be expected, none of the participants believed *Return of the King* depicted real events. However, most reported that they felt the film was recognisably medieval, or contained elements that coincided with their expectations of the Middle Ages. Though chapter 5 outlined the ways in which *The Lord of the Rings* is medieval (through medieval analogues and sources), these participants, being unfamiliar with medieval studies, mostly recognised the film as medieval due to narrative tropes and visual icons of the period.

Justin saw the film as a recognisably medieval world: ‘it fit in with the, what I imagine a medieval world to look like in a way’. When asked how this film compared to the other films she had been shown, Erica responded: ‘I, I thought it kind of a mixture of the two that we’d seen before. Like, it had the fantasy elements, loads of it, it’s obviously set in like a middle-agey, medieval times’. Dan went so far as to claim of *Return of the King*: ‘I thought it was probably depicted medieval England better than, like, *Beowulf* did [...] I think that reflected culturally better, obviously I don’t know if it did, but in my mind it seemed to gel’. To Dan, the culture was similar enough to medieval England to be identifiably medieval, in spite of the fact that he understood it was not set during the real Middle Ages. To him, there was an unidentifiable quality to the film that made it *seem* like a good depiction of medieval England in spite of his admission that he would not know what was.

When asked whether they learned anything from *Return of the King* about the Middle Ages, participants responded negatively. Erica: ‘I think it’s just fantasy. But like they based the time period on medieval. [...] It’s all, it’s too much of a fantasy to kind of learn anything historical about medieval times from it’. With that said, participants identified many instances where they



regarded what they were seeing as corresponding with their preconceptions of the Middle Ages, and furthermore, showed evidence that those preconceptions were being formed by the films they had seen in the previous days.

### **What is 'medieval' in *Return of the King*?**

Participants saw the Middle Ages in a variety of different elements of *Return of the King*, and found ample grounds for comparison with the other two films. When Erica was asked what to her made the film obviously 'middle-agey' (her words), she responded: 'the battles, the knights, there was the kings, there was, em, not so much the feasting apart from the king [...] And it had the mythology, like, part of it as well'. When asked to clarify what she meant by 'mythology', she, Carin and Claire named 'the dragonish things' 'the wizards' and 'the ring'. When asked what in the films seemed medieval, the June group listed, 'I think chiefly saying the clothes and the weapons' and 'The clothes, the weapons, Rohan I would say as well'.

When the conversation turned to the question of whether *Return of the King* was medieval, comparisons with the previously-shown films were frequent. Erica found similarities in 'the battles like the um, big towers they use and the throwy things they used in Lord of the Rings, they used the same ones in em, *Kingdom of Heaven* that we watched yesterday, and seemed to, it seemed to be a lot based on, on medieval times'. Sean also compared the battles: 'the battle scene is pretty much, you know, very similar to the one in *Kingdom of Heaven*. It's the same, the same kind of weaponry being used, it's the same kind of tactics being used by both sides. Um, they look like medieval battles discounting the fact that one side were monsters. But they looked, they looked medieval'. To both, siege warfare and technology is a particularly medieval feature of both films, and ripe for comparison. Although Laura was insecure about her knowledge of the Middle Ages, she cited similarities between the depiction of the siege of Osgiliath in *Return of the King* and the siege of Jerusalem in *Kingdom of Heaven*. 'I don't, I don't really know anything about medieval you know battle and stuff like that but there seemed to be a lot of similarities to me, you

know. Obviously there was the fantasy element, but, so there weren't like giant elephants in the last one or anything but, there were, I don't know what they're called but the towery things [...] and they're also called trebuchets or something? Or catapult things, there was stuff like that'. Laura acknowledges the fantastical elements of *Return of the King*, but it still able to draw comparisons with the more realistic *Kingdom of Heaven*. This implies that some saw *Kingdom of Heaven* as an authority on medieval warfare, and thus *Return of the King's* similar depiction renders it recognisably medieval.

Some also judged the narrative of *Return of the King* as medieval because of its similarity to *Kingdom of Heaven*. For example 'it also had the, em, whole sort of crusade, in like, going to, let's see, burn the ring'. Another: 'coming back to what they said about the crusade last week about it being sort of a journey, I think that came out in this movie [*Return of the King*] more than in the other one [*Kingdom of Heaven*] because you've got Aragorn's road to being king, and you've got Frodo's quest to destroy the ring'. This equates the idea of 'crusade' with the idea of 'quest'. As a result the fantasy quests of *Return of the King* are rendered medieval by association with the Crusades.

### **Dressing the medieval part**

Participants most frequently referred to material culture when describing *Return of the King's* medieval quality. Dan thought one very medieval aspect of the film was 'The idea of horsemen and the way they were armoured and the way they made camp, I thought was quite good and also the dress of it seemed quite, what I imagined um, the lords to be like'. Dan relied primarily upon the material culture of the world to indicate the time period, the armour and the clothes. Carin agreed: 'The costumes were quite medieval. And the armour'. When asked to clarify, she said: 'It's just that kind of dress, the dresses the women were wearing and things, obviously the armour'. To her, women in dresses and men in armour imply the Middle Ages. Even more, her

instinctual first response, when listing the medieval qualities of the film, is to comment upon the costume.

When asked how medieval the world of *Return of the King* was, Justin, Sean and Stephen responded with this interchange:

Justin: Uh, I think it was pretty, in a way it was pretty medieval. Um, in terms of what they wore=

Stephen: =yeah, the way it looked.

Justin: Maybe in the way that the, they presented the speech and things almost in a way. Just the way they talked.

Stephen: Quite archaic.

Mod: What do you mean?

Justin: Umm, I can't really think of instances but you know, there there was a cer- there was a certain way of speaking sometimes that was similar to, maybe what you saw in *Kingdom of Heaven* in that it was very sort of, I don't I'm trying to think of the word but I can't.

Mod: Can anyone help him out?

Sean: I know what he means but I can't really explain it.

Justin: It almost, it almost seemed a bit grandiose really. And and, especially when someone like Aragorn talking, he was king, it was, in a way he he was kind of similar to, Balin [sic] from ye- from yesterday in the way that he spoke. [...] I think in medieval in the, in the sense of, in, i- as in what I would, you know imagine it to be medieval if it, well, in a way as if it was put on a screen and somebody told me it was medieval then I would, I would succumb to it knowing that maybe it isn't truly medieval like that but because it's on a film like that I can believe it because in other films that's how it's presented. You know?

Justin initially (and seemingly instinctually) referred to the costume as being a very medieval element, then to the visual aspect of the world generally. However, the conversation then turned to language. To these participants, the language had a certain 'grandiose', 'archaic' cadence which fit with their ideas of the Middle Ages. Justin astutely points out that this is a feature of the period which is a commonly-accepted trope, but may have little to do with historical reality.

On the other hand, similar to many critiques of *Beowulf*, John disliked some of the accents used in the film: 'A lot of the orcs had this weird sort of cockney accent, which is, uh, not in the right time period obviously because it wouldn't have been around in medieval times, and when I watch it that actually does bring it down a bit, bring down the sort of realism a bit'. To him the

urban environment of East London that gave rise to the Cockney accent is strictly not medieval, and therefore the orcs' use of it 'brings down the realism'. Interestingly, he seemed willing to turn a blind eye to the breach of reality represented by the very presence of orcs. This shows that the participants have a multi-layered understanding of historical realism. Sometimes they accept large violations of realism as part of the fantastical nature of the world of the film. When doing this, however, they do not surrender their critical eye of our history. As a result, it seems as if many of them can understand the film to be medieval and not medieval, or historical and not historical at the same time.

### **To what degree is it not medieval?**

To an historian, *The Return of the King* is not medieval. Similarly, some participants felt that aspects of the film were less medieval than others. Some others rigidly stated that since the film does not depict our own world, that the film cannot be considered medieval at all.

John labelled anything fantastical or magical not medieval. This included:

Anything which isn't real, well, anything like the sort of magic stuff for me- that makes it un-medieval, 'cause I only see medieval as the actual, what actually happened and stuff. But I know, I know that's not really, that can't be a common point of view [...] I know a lot of people feel like um, those sort of things fit with the medieval [...] like, stuff to do with magic or kinds of weird creatures, stuff like that'.

Carin reported that her initial reaction to the film outside the environment of the focus group setting was not to identify the film as medieval; the environment of the focus group itself may have led her to relate it to the Middle Ages. She reported: 'I did notice watching it this time that after watching the previous two films that it is kind of, yeah, with the battles and stuff it is kind of like that era, but when I'd watched them normally I just think, like, *Lord of the Rings*, Middle Earth, rather than how it relates to the like, our history'. Additionally, Erica reported that the mindset of having watched *Beowulf* and *Kingdom of Heaven* immediately prior led her to compare this film to the previous ones: 'when I was watching it I was pinpointing like trying to compare it to the other two. I didn't really, think about it being not [medieval]'.

It is difficult to determine to what degree the environment of the focus group setting influenced ideas about whether or not *Return of the King* was medieval. This may imply that those who are more familiar with the Middle Ages are more inclined to identify fantasy like *Return of the King* as medieval. The frequent comparisons made between *Return of the King*, *Kingdom of Heaven* and *Beowulf* implies that connections can be seen; however, they may only be noticeable by those who are frequent consumers of medievalisms.

### **In what ways was *Return of the King* considered realistic?**

Though many participants regarded the film as medieval, they were less inclined to label the film as 'realistic'. This was primarily due to the fantastical elements and the setting in a separate world. Some tried to draw some allegorical parallels between these fantastical elements and reality, but most saw the two as mutually exclusive.

When asked how realistic *Return of the King* was some expressed difficulty deciding whether to judge the film based upon the rules of our world or the internal logic of Tolkien's (and Jackson's) invented world. Erica felt that one aspect of the film 'wouldn't really happen, or, maybe it would in hobbit world'. When asked whether the film was realistic, Erica and Chloe had differing understandings of what that meant:

Erica: Obviously not with the whole middle-earthly elves and that kind of jazz. Um,=

Chloe: =you want to believe it though don't you. (laugh) I was sitting there going c'mon, get up the hill!

To Chloe, her sense of realism was tied to the emotional affect of the film rather than its correlation to objective reality. Justin also understood realism as including empathetic emotional affect. When asked if the film was realistic, he asked 'In terms of what, expressing sort of, you know, emotions and things like that?'

Justin and Stephen argued that the fantasy elements made *Return of the King* more emotionally satisfying than *Kingdom of Heaven*, if less realistic. Stephen felt that the fantastical world lent it a scope that the other two films did not possess: 'that's where the fantasy element

comes in that they were fighting for a big, big thing, with the ring and stuff. Whereas, whereas just fighting for control of a single city in *Kingdom of Heaven*'. Justin felt that the fantasy world was more immersive:

'I think the fantasy element helped it a lot though 'cause you kinda felt you could immerse yourself into it a bit more, knowing it was a completely different world as well. [...] with *Kingdom of Heaven* it was very sort of rooted in sort of real religious sort of things that have happened and you can believe have come, completely happened, whereas this you know, you know it's fantasy and you know, that anything is possible in this world that you're watching'.

To Justin, the expectation of veracity distances historical films from him emotionally. On the other hand, a fantasy epic such as *Return of the King* can be satisfying by virtue of the fact that it does not need to conform to reality. In that environment where 'anything is possible', he is able to emotionally invest more readily, because the story is crafted to be satisfying.

### **Conclusion: Return of the King**

In summary, many aspects of *Return of the King* were regarded by the participants as being 'medieval', even if the world itself was not 'medieval' (Middle Earth being a separate world with fantastical creatures and magic). This made participants less inclined to see the film as 'realistic' in anything other than an emotionally affective way, though many of them saw it as believable. Furthermore, in discussing what aspects of the film were 'medieval' or not, participants frequently compared this film to the ones shown previously in the focus group. This implies that they saw those aspects as directly comparable to depictions of the Middle Ages which they felt had a greater historical authority and also that they had granted historical authoritative status to those films which they had seen in the previous sessions.

### **Conclusion**

Each film had unique characteristics to which the participants responded. Often, however, they did not react in ways that a scholarly reading of the films (like those seen in chapter 5) might

anticipate. For example, *Beowulf*'s status as a famous early-medieval poem did not always mean that participants interpreted the film in the context of a close reading of that poem. Similarly, although *Kingdom of Heaven* can be easily viewed allegorically to link the Crusades and modern conflicts, most participants did not see this aspect as noteworthy. Those who did see this correlation at work often felt that the parallels drawn between modern and medieval were not as pronounced as they had expected. Participants often viewed *Return of the King* in a complex way. Many found the film to be medieval in specific respects but not overall, or realistic in the sense of being believable if not historical. They clearly saw that the world was not our own, and yet many still judged it by historical standards. In the following chapter I will extend this analysis, and systematically compare common thematic elements present in all three films, in order to describe what elements make a film seem 'medieval'.

## **Chapter 7: Results III— Participants’ reaction to medieval elements**

### **common to the films**

This chapter will examine the participants’ interpretations of the elements of the three films that were labelled ‘medieval’, the purpose being to understand the common images of the period that the participants saw. In particular, reactions related to the films’ depictions of medieval landscape, society, gender relations, and religion will be explored. These categories emerged from the interview data, but not discretely – participants routinely linked them. For example, social class was often described as both a product and producer of the built landscape, while knighthood was at once an aristocratic class definition, a quasi-religious moral ideal and an icon of medieval martial masculinity. The chapter disentangles some of these complex issues and describes how they relate to the participants’ overall understandings of the medieval world.

### **Medieval society**

Each of the films constructs an idea of medieval society: relationships between people, social structures, intellectual culture and social conditions. In particular, participants reacted strongly to the depictions of social conditions. Sometimes they drew conscious or unconscious links between medieval and contemporary culture. More often, they revelled in the alien qualities of medieval culture, asserting their authority over an inferior past.

### **The anti-social Middle Ages**

As discussed in chapter 5, participants simultaneously held two images of the Middle Ages. Those images contained an implicit comparison of the period with the present day: either the Middle Ages were better (an era of light, chivalry, nobility, beauty and fantasy), or worse (an era of squalor, barbarism, torture, suffering and disease). Overall, however, the idealised Middle Ages were only very rarely discussed; far more often, participants saw in these films support for their image of the squalid and barbaric Middle Ages.



For example, Jess felt that *Beowulf* was an accurate depiction of the Middle Ages because it focused on what was, to her, the two biggest forces in medieval society: 'fighting and [...] power. I mean, it's not like they had much else to do, is it?' Along with some of the other participants, Jess cleaved to an idea of the Middle Ages as a period in which barbarity reigned, and in which behaviour that might be considered antisocial today (such as fighting, drinking and sexual promiscuity) was more pervasive. Robert felt that the barbarity of the historical Vikings would be impossible to depict accurately in *Beowulf* without the film achieving higher than a 12A rating: 'the Vikings were quite barbaric people, so if you wanna really make it accurate, then I don't think you can, like, fully show it to twelve-year-olds'. To him, *Beowulf's* depiction of the Vikings was less 'barbaric' than expected.

On the other hand, Dan felt that the emphasis on sex in *Beowulf* was ill-placed, saying,

It seemed to focus on sex a lot. [...]I know that that went on but I don't think it was the focal [sic] of life, to the extent that the movie portrayed it. [...] there are plenty of buildings today where there are just drunken orgies going on but that doesn't mean that you say that that's what life's about. That seems to be, 'look what happened in the Middle Ages'.

To Dan, the makers of *Beowulf* were intentionally creating a vision of the medieval past in which anti-social behaviour is a titillating barbaric spectacle, rather than a depiction of historical reality. Jess disagreed. To her, the sex and drunkenness in *Beowulf* fit her knowledge of the period: 'I kind of liked the drunk, drunkenness and the sex, sexy stuff that sort of made sense to me. It being set when it was, because they didn't want to drink water did they, cause it was like filthy, so they did all just get lashed all the time'. To her, *Beowulf* is depicted as being set in an age of drunkenness simply because that is what the Middle Ages were. She came to this conclusion based on a piece of information she learned about the period (that beer was generally safer than water), and then turned that image into an extreme idea of medieval perpetual drunkenness, supporting her overarching idea of the Middle Ages as a savage and unruly place.

Discussions about *Kingdom of Heaven* were similar. Dan declared one scene to be unrealistic because 'they were able to kill all the Bishop's men then get away to Jerusalem then

come back to the same house and his crime of murder, and then rebellion on a small scale was completely overlooked and he could live a normal life'. In reply to this, Mark used his knowledge of the Middle Ages as a barbaric age as evidence to support the plausibility of the film: 'yeah, but bear in mind most of the authorities back then were corrupt and inept [...] they didn't exactly have forensics so, a sneaky arrow in the gut or a bit of a poison ivy in the glass and bye bye'.<sup>374</sup> Mark then explained that lawlessness was pervasive in the Middle Ages 'just because they, the fastest way to travel was by horseback it's hard to maintain the same level of control'. To Mark, the Middle Ages were lawless because law cannot be enforced without technology. To him, also, state control is a product of personal mobility, and both were absent in the Middle Ages.<sup>375</sup>

### **Class warfare**

Another feature common to the films is the depiction of a rigid class structure. As already noted, many participants felt the Middle Ages to have been marked by a large division between rich and poor. The former category included knights, ladies, kings, and queens; the poor comprised a homogenous mass of peasantry.

Class plays a significant role in each film. *Beowulf* is primarily about the warrior elites. In *Kingdom of Heaven*, the protagonist journeys across geographical, cultural and class boundaries: he begins the film as a blacksmith, becomes a baron (and nearly king), and by the end of the film loses everything. *Return of the King* focuses upon the actions of royalty from two kingdoms and their warrior elites as they fight for their continued existence; in addition, the hobbit heroes represent an ideal of the rural gentry.

John, Jess and Dan noticed that all of the films were stories about the upper class. This seemed natural, due to their experience in school:

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<sup>374</sup> Mark then endured teasing from the rest of the group because poison ivy in a glass would not be lethal.

<sup>375</sup> Though medieval law enforcement differed in its methods from those of today, the period was hardly lawless: see John Briggs and others, 'The Medieval Origins of the English Criminal Justice System', in *Crime and Punishment in England: An Introductory History* (London: UCL Press, 1996), pp. 1-14; *Crime, Law and Society in the Later Middle Ages: Selected Sources*, ed. by Anthony Musson and Edward Powell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009); *Medieval Crime and Social Control*, ed. by Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

John: They taught us [in school] a bit of history about it, the peasants and stuff, but you're not going to know about them all. I guess, that's why we associate the kings and queens with them [the Middle Ages] so much, 'cause that's mainly the amount of information that comes out about them, they're the important things at the time.

Jess: I mean, you just don't really care about what like, peasants have to do each day, like "oh we have to farm, and we have to like, tend the fire" like, it's a lot more interesting to read about kings and queens and stuff, so yeah, I get that, why they focused on that part. [...]

Dan: I think it's best to focus around the monarch because they were doing most stuff.

To these three, there is an implication that the focus on the monarchy rather than the peasantry is due to a relative lack of information about peasants. Peasants thus seem unimportant, inactive, even boring; as a result, stories involving them are naturally infrequent. Sean, Stephen and Justin took the opposite view. *Beowulf* 'focused upon the knights and the lords a bit too much'. Stephen noted that the only poor character in *Beowulf* was 'the peasant servant that was always getting kicked and stuff', and misremembered this servant, instead of his master Unferth, as the one who 'ends up getting his face burned'. Stephen replaced the poetic justice against the abusive master in the film with a false memory of another cruelty towards the poor. Furthermore, Stephen here also misremembers the character Cain as a 'servant', whereas in the film he is explicitly referred to on a number of occasions as a 'slave'. It is possible that Stephen may have misremembered Cain as a servant because to him, slavery is not an expected part of the Middle Ages whereas servitude is.<sup>376</sup> It is also possible that he misremembered Cain in this way because he instinctually associates the word 'slave' with the African slaves of the Colonial period; thus Cain, being white, may not seem like the typical slave.

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<sup>376</sup> Slavery was common in the place and time in which *Beowulf* is set, and is subsequently recorded by contemporaries in England from the seventh century to the eleventh. Stephen's potential misunderstanding of medieval Norse slavery fits with Ruth Karras' assertion in her book *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia* that, 'The existence of slavery in medieval Scandinavia comes as a surprise to many historians who are not medievalists and to many Scandinavians who are not historians [...] the institution does not often appear in any detail in discussions of medieval European social history'. Ruth Mazo Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia*, Yale Historical Publications, 135 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 1. For slavery in Anglo-Saxon England, (where the poem was written) see: David A. E. Pelteret, *Slavery in Early Mediaeval England: From the Reign of Alfred Until the Twelfth Century*, Studies in Anglo-Saxon History, 7 (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1995).

Stephen saw the lack of class hierarchy as a reason to criticise *Beowulf* as a poor depiction of the period. 'I kinda got, again, the picture of the Middle Ages as a very stratified society and very hierarchical. But the king was there drinking with everyone, and he was uh, pretty much one of them'. This led Justin to conclude 'He seemed almost more like a chief than a king [...] someone who was just, getting everyone to move getting everyone to do as he says rather than standing in this big room at the top of a castle somewhere'. To Justin, the image of the king is not just removed from his subjects in terms of class, but also physically: an isolated figure ruling from the top of a castle. Hrothgar, therefore, was a chief rather than a king because he fraternised with his subjects in a way that seemed inappropriate for one of his station.

To these participants, the depiction of medieval social class was a notable part of each film. However, there was little agreement on whether the depiction was accurate. Some participants recoiled from seeing a depiction of the abuses of the lower classes, whereas some saw the focus on the nobility as desirable, even natural. Some also held ideas of the Middle Ages as a classless society, as represented by the built landscape (see below, p. 252).

### **Medieval women and men**

For many participants, the Middle Ages were characterised by strict rigid gender roles and social boundaries between sexes. Men were kings and knights, always heroic, martial figures. Women, on the other hand, are generally seen as passive – the figure of the good queen, the good wife, the princess, or the lover. Each of the films relies upon this strict stereotyping, but as often to subvert as to reinforce them. The participants bridled at the depiction of these strict gender boundaries, but usually cited them as problems deriving from the historical period rather than flaws in the films.

### The depiction of medieval women

In *Beowulf*, women are relegated (as they are in the poem) to a secondary role. However, each woman has a different role; in the poem, aside from Grendel's mother, women rarely appear (though some have recently argued that in spite of their limited appearances, their roles are nevertheless important).<sup>377</sup> The film recapitulates the oft-criticised virgin/whore dichotomy of femininity in popular culture: Queen Wealtheow is wise and virtuous but passive, whereas the Grendel's mother is powerful, evil, and active (as discussed in chapter 4, p. 74). Participants saw this relegation to the sidelines as reflecting medieval social realities. Sean noted the difference in the depiction of men and women in *Beowulf*, 'the men were all running around doing things and there was the women who were sort of fussing over their clothes and, an ember on their skirt and they're like "oh dear" [...] The guy had one arm at that point'. Stephen, Justin and Katy looked more critically at the passive role of the women in *Beowulf*:

Stephen: I thought it was quite interesting about the, the role of women in the, or I mean the previous king he left his wife. And then she was very accepting when he started sleeping with that younger woman. So I don't know whether that was like=

Justin: They didn't seem to have any kind of free will did they? They kind of had=

Stephen: =And likewise they didn't have any kind of strong, um, equal partnership in the marriage or any kind of strong=

Justin: =Or even in fact he had that mistress kind of thing on the side=

Stephen: =yeah. And that his wife knew about it and was, to some extent fine with it. Yeah.

Katy: The queen being passed down as well=

Stephen: =Yeah, yeah, exactly, yeah.

Justin: But in a way it kind of made men look a bit weak, I think, as well at the same time.

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<sup>377</sup> The women of the poem *Beowulf* have been reassessed by Jane Chance, Dorothy Carr Porter, and others. Arguments have been made that interpret the women in *Beowulf* as central to the poem, either as hostesses, peace-weavers or warmongers. Wealtheow and Hyrd represent the Anglo-Saxon female ideal of hostess and peace-weaver, Grendel's mother and Thryth represent the monstrous inversion of that ideal. However, this does not lessen the point that the role played by women in the *Beowulf* poem is limited. For more see: Jane Chance, *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1986); Gillian R. Overing, 'The Women of *Beowulf*: A Context for Interpretation', in *The Beowulf Reader*, ed. by Peter S Baker, Basic Readings in Anglo-Saxon England, 1 (London: Garland, 2000), pp. 219-260; Dorothy Carr Porter, 'The Social Centrality of Women in *Beowulf*: A New Context', *The Heroic Age*, 2001 <<http://www.mun.ca/mst/heroicage/issues/5/porter1.html>> [accessed 25 February 2010].

To these three, *Beowulf* depicts a time when women did not have autonomy and were passed as property from one man to another. They also saw social inequality, with women being powerless to stop their husbands from philandering and being obliged passively to accept infidelity. Justin further felt that this reflected poorly on the men who, driven by their lust, were powerless to stop themselves. Chloe, however, felt very strongly that the role of women in *Beowulf* reflected poorly on both the filmmakers and the Middle Ages:

It's tried to make it appeal to lots of people I think by like the way they portray women in it as well, making them objects and the men are the ones who go and fight [...] so I think they've tried to, bring, medieval and Middle Ages a bit closer to how we view it almost, and, incorporate modern day society into how it was then [...] It's, just, they, they're there on the side you go back to them in the evening, they're just objects, nothing, more. [...] And what happened then is probably still happening now in certain aspects.

To Chloe, the mistreatment of women in *Beowulf* is a projection, by the filmmakers, of modern problems back onto the Middle Ages. To her, however, the projection is also an accurate link between modern and medieval; in portraying women in this fashion, the filmmakers were drawing accurate historical links between the mistreatment of women then and now. This seems to imply that Chloe saw *Beowulf* both as a story which recapitulates (and possibly perpetuates) modern gender problems and also an authentic depiction of the mistreatment of medieval women.

Katy saw the depiction of gender relations as historically inaccurate because of her suppositions about the strictness of medieval religion.

If you go back to like the treatment of women and tie that in with religion it's probably not what you would expect either with them going off and having affairs and things like that. That kind of, you expect them to be really religious and stick religiously to whatever Christianity said, and they weren't doing that.

Katy holds the common perception that all medieval people were devout Christians, and furthermore, that the sexual ethics of medieval Christianity were the same as in Christianity today. Thus, she views the casual sexual immorality of the protagonist as an indicator that he is not a good Christian, and, by extension, not very medieval. Hence, the sexual misconduct is not a credible medieval dimension to the film, in spite of the fact that the adulterers (Hrothgar and

Beowulf), are not shown to be Christians. This shows that some participants (also see commentary by Mark and Dan, above, p. 160) felt that Christianity is ahistorical, that its rules of right and wrong have always been what they are now, and any deviation from this is not 'correct' Christianity. This is not correct, but is also not surprising. Some institutions which promote a moral viewpoint (such as many religions) make claims to the universality of their strictures in order to give them a timeless, ahistorical power. However, just because medieval Christianity differs from contemporary Christianity, this does not mean that one is 'right' and the other 'wrong'.

In *Kingdom of Heaven* there is only one significant female character. Princess Sibylla's role is primarily that of the protagonist's love interest which provides the romantic sub-plot common in adventure and epic films.<sup>378</sup> Sibylla also plays the role of kingmaker, and is the catalyst for the disaster at the end of the film; she has the power to choose the king when Baldwin IV dies, and in choosing her husband, Guy, she causes the downfall of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. No participants discussed the role of women in *Kingdom of Heaven* or the depiction of Sibylla. While this might imply that they felt the depiction was natural and did not significantly conflict with their expectations, in the absence of evidence no conclusion can be drawn.

In *Return of the King*, there are a few women who break the mould. Arwen rebels against the wishes of her father, and in so doing ensures a happy romantic ending for the hero. Eowyn, against the orders of the men in her family, dons a man's armaments and becomes a hero in her own right. In doing so, she ultimately defeats the Witch King, who, it is prophesied in the film, 'cannot be killed by any man'. The participants' discussion of women in the film centred on Eowyn's role as a heroic rule-breaker. Erica viewed Eowyn's heroics as part of a metanarrative within two of the films:

I noticed in the two films, *Kingdom of Heaven* and *Lord of the Rings*, there both was a theme, a little subplot of it doesn't matter where you come from, what you, you can be

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<sup>378</sup> Sibylla's character is much expanded in the 'Director's Cut' edition of the film: Ridley Scott, *Kingdom Of Heaven - Definitive Edition DVD* (20th Century Fox, 2005). For more on the real Sibylla of Jerusalem, see: Bernard Hamilton, 'Women in the Crusader States: The Queens of Jerusalem (1100-1190)', in *Medieval Women*, ed. by Derek Baker, *Studies in Church History*, 1 (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1978), pp. 143-174; Bernard Hamilton, *The Leper King and His Heirs: Baldwin IV and the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

the hero [...] [in *Kingdom of Heaven*] the main guy was like a slave,<sup>379</sup> you could be a slave but you'll still be a knight and that kind of like, gone away together. And then *Lord of the Rings*, the little hobbit guy and the woman, even though they was told not to go into battle they still went into battle and they was, was like the two, two like, surviving characters [...] if they wasn't there, it could have gone a lot worse.

Erica then tied this equal-opportunity narrative to her understanding of medieval history. When asked if this trope was particularly medieval, she argued that it was, based both upon her knowledge of medieval society and its inclusion in medieval films:

It's kind of shown a lot in those, kind of like, medievally battle films, 's always the underdog that can do it [...] I guess it is kind of medieval 'cause, 'cause people had to fight, cause they kinda was like if you was like a blacksmith or something you had to drop your, your tools and go off to fight- everybody could be a hero.

Erica has a perception that the pervasiveness of war in the period, gave ordinary individuals — even women — the opportunity for heroism.

## Medieval men

Men play the central role in all three films. Not only are men the protagonists, but in many ways the films can be interpreted as parables about what it means to be a good man. Each focuses upon two social institutions which were restricted to men: warrior-hood (usually knighthood) and kingship. By association with Arthurian legend, kings and knights also have a mythology of their own; the idea, and ideal, of both kingship and chivalry today is more a product of nineteenth- and twentieth-century medievalisms than medieval reality. Each film addressed knighthood and kingship in a different way, and was interpreted differently by the participants.

## Knighthood

Knights are one of the leading icons of the Middle Ages (being one of the top two responses in both 'medieval' and 'middle ages' stream of consciousness exercise – see Figures 3 and 4, p. 121).

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<sup>379</sup> In *Kingdom of Heaven*, Balian is not a slave but a free blacksmith. Erica's false memory of his bondage may imply she sees all medieval poor as slaves, or there may have been something in the blacksmithing scene that implied slavery to her.



Knights as an icon have a dual role: in one way, they are an emblem of the medieval warrior class. In another, knighthood implies a set of idealised virtues and ‘chivalric’ behaviour. Only *Kingdom of Heaven*, addresses knighthood (both the military reality and the moral ideal) directly. It is the only film in which any characters are explicitly called ‘knights’, and in which a code of chivalry and ideology of knighthood is presented. In spite of this, some participants saw knights, and knightly behaviour, in all of the films—often in figures that medievalists might not immediately so identify.

### **Knights, knights everywhere?**

Erica recounted that in *Beowulf*, the ‘monster broke through the, the doors to get in and that’s where all the, like the knightly-kind of heroes went to save the hall’. Stephen, however, did not see the thanes of *Beowulf* as knights, and he explained that for *Beowulf* to be considered as medieval, he would expect ‘knights and castles and things like that; there’s none of that’. Sean agreed ‘in *Beowulf* no one really stands out as a knight’.

Mark felt that the knights of *Kingdom of Heaven* were easily identifiable because they used knightly equipment, which he listed as: ‘armour, horseback, and preferably a lance’. Erica saw the knights in *Kingdom of Heaven* as fitting her idea of the archetypal knight, both in terms of their equipment and their actions:

When they were going into battle they had the whole, flags and all different, different types of armour with the, the, what’s it, crest? Crest on the, and um, the horses in armour and the fact that like they had they were all sat in like a round circle and discussed everything and, and like the they all was like, responsible, the kings told them what to do even though there’s all different like, different groups of knights there were, they all kind of took orders from the king’.

Interestingly, Erica here recounts a false memory of the film which corresponds more with an Arthurian expectation of knighthood than with the scenes as depicted. The knights of *Kingdom of Heaven* never ‘sat in like a round circle and discussed everything’, and many of the knights are not ‘responsible’ and hardly ‘all [...] took orders from the king’. It seems that Erica is misapplying her

idea of a virtuous round table of Arthurian knights to the often less- than-virtuous knights of *Kingdom of Heaven*.

Some labelled the Riders of Rohan in *Return of the King* as 'knights' because they fight in a manner typical of knights (see p. 110). Erica saw the depiction of knights in *Return of the King* and *Kingdom of Heaven* as similar because of their comparable equipment: 'same kind of helmets, same armour, same swords, same catapultey things, em, had the same, had the same flags as well, like, had the, what's the like, different little mini-groups all in the same, like in a big group, but each little mini-group had their own like flag and crest'. Stephen and Sean, however, saw knights as a specifically historical phenomenon. Stephen stated, 'because *Kingdom of Heaven* is set in an actual period of history, you kinda do get the sense of knights. But in *Lord of the Rings* because there's no equivalent system'. Sean continued: 'I guess what the guys had in, the um, Minas Tirith with the silver helmets that had the bits I guess they were knights, but it wasn't what my immediate thought'. To these two, knights are bound up in a specifically historical 'system' of knighthood. Since there was no such thing in *Return of the King*, its mounted warriors do not count as 'knights'. They wear a uniform rather than individual heraldry, and as a result, may have seemed part of a professional soldiery than a group of heroic individuals choosing to collaborate. This may imply something about the 'system of knighthood' as understood by these participants. Knighthood requires independent, recognisable individuals in contradistinction to paid professional soldiers.

### **Chivalric ideals**

*Kingdom of Heaven* was the only film which explicitly addressed chivalric ideals. Many participants saw the characters in the film as representing a modern (or, to them, a timeless, universal) ideal of morality rather than a specifically medieval one. This is one of the main problems for medieval films: modern morals are frequently put into medieval mouths. Laura held the idea of a knight as a paragon of virtue: 'I think you associate knights with honour, though they're generally quite

upstanding people when, when you imagine a knight you don't get like immoral knights going around doing bad deeds'. When asked what she meant by 'honour', she cited the speech made by Godfrey when knighting Balian: 'Um, I think the stuff that they listed in that scene in the movie, you know, telling the truth, stuff like that'.<sup>380</sup> The May focus group felt that, even though knights in *Kingdom of Heaven* did not act in the manner typical of knights, that this depiction was more realistic than their knowledge.

- Jake: You kind of think of them like sort of like legendary sort of, when you hear legends of knights and things when you're kids and things you always hear this sort of 'shining chivalric' sort of person who does no wrong and always saved the princess and things like that.
- Mark: And when you get a little older and a bit more cynical you realise that=
- Jake: =Yeah ob, obviously were like the French=
- Mark: =other, French guy who became king, [...]I would imagine most of them probably were like that.

Mark is inclined to believe the depiction of Knights in *Kingdom of Heaven* because his 'more cynical' view dictated that a childhood image of virtuous warriors was inaccurate. The May group also revised its understanding of knighthood based upon the scene in which Balian helps build a well on his lands:

- Jake: I like the way, when you saw them go, Balian or whatever, go to his lands and sort of like, you saw his knights there sort of, they were just helping out farming and, putting wells and things, I thought that was nice sort of yeah, 's not all fighting and battling and swords and everything it's
- Mark: Much more irrigation-orientated.
- Mod: So is being a knight in the same way=
- Jess: I think of like, yeah, I think of like knights having their own castle and having to protect their people that live in their castle that live in like the village around it. And like that's sort of what Orlando Bloom's doing with his like 'Ooo, let's irrigate to make crops and stuff'
- Mark: Yes, a good knight is one who would—will get involved in the dirty work.

Here they are using *Kingdom of Heaven* to apply a Marxist interpretation to the Middle Ages. That is, it seems that they feel that Balian is virtuous because he, as a noble, does not place himself

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<sup>380</sup> Laura is referring to the list of commandments which Godfrey imparts to Balian when knighting him: 'Be without fear in the face of your enemies. Be brave and upright that God may love thee. Speak the truth always, even if it leads to your death. Safeguard the helpless and do no wrong'. Scott, *Kingdom of Heaven*.

above the proletariat who work his land. In Marx's words Balian takes part in 'a community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in common, in which the labour power of all the different individuals is consciously applied as the combined labour power of the community'.<sup>381</sup> Balian is a good knight because he is a good landowner, and to them, being a good landowner means helping his subjects by getting directly involved in the 'dirty work'.

Jess particularly enjoyed the scene in *Kingdom of Heaven* where Balian knights a crowd of militiamen and commoners because this fit better with her modern view of knighthood than with her ideas of medieval knighthood. 'I thought that was cool at the end when he knighted everyone. Like, 'cause it is, like what does it really mean when someone knights you, you know what I mean, like? In the grand scheme of things it's just calling someone by a different name'. Dan retorted, 'Usually when your city's not besieged it'd confer certain actual honours [...] like being able to, have [I] think a few troops'. Jess then replied 'But it doesn't technically make you better than everyone'. For Jess, knighthood is an honorific rather than a way of life. To her, this scene fits neatly with a modern, British sense of knighthood as a civilian honour bestowed by a monarch rather than the status of a class of elite warrior-aristocrats. She recoils from the idea that knighthood makes a person 'better' than others in the sense that they are more significant, or more virtuous. However, at the same time she likes it that ordinary people are knighted. Jess expressed the view that no one is 'better' than anyone else, and used the film to support it; for her, the title of knighthood, while a useful motivating tool, neither confers nor confirms greatness or morality.

When Mark discussed the Rohirrim of *Return of the King*, he contradicted his earlier claims about the virtue of pacifist knights in *Kingdom of Heaven*. In this context, Mark saw aggression as one quality of a good knight: 'the king of Rohan, he's obviously a good example of a knight [...] he's at the front of his troops, he's charging into battle, he's helping his, he's helping Gondor even when Gondor don't help him'. So, to Mark, Theoden is a good knight not only because he is a good

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<sup>381</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. by Ben Fowkes and David Fernback (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 90.

leader but because he is a skilful and aggressive warrior. Dan agreed that Theoden was a good knight because he 'Took the decision to fight when they didn't need to and they're fighting for a more just cause than in the last one. They were fighting for a place that held very little value [in *Kingdom of Heaven*], this time they're fighting for their ex- their peaceful existence- rather than charging off around the world'. To both Dan and Mark, context is paramount: aggression is virtuous in *Return of the King* because the War of the Ring was presented in the film as a just war. In *Kingdom of Heaven*, the Crusades were presented as an unjust war, and as a result, aggression in such circumstances is considered un-chivalric. This shows that perceptions of virtue are malleable; some saw the morality of knighthood as relative to its context. The justification of the action presented in the film is central, rather than the action in and of itself.

## **Kingship**

Although in the general discussions participants often referred to monarchy in gendered pairs (as 'King and Queen'), the plots of these films (and hence the discussions of them) centred on the actions of the king. Neither Baldwin IV (*Kingdom of Heaven*), Theoden, nor the Steward of Gondor (*Return of the King*) have a queen, and Sibylla (*Kingdom of Heaven*) and Wealtheow (*Beowulf*) play minor, passive roles. Therefore it is unsurprising that discussion of the monarchy focused on the king.

Stephen glibly defined a king as 'a man in a palace who has people killed on a whim'. However, each film meditates upon monarchy in a different way: Guy de Lusignan in *Kingdom of Heaven* corresponds with Stephen's assessment of the king as homicidal tyrant, but all other kings depicted examine the role and ideology of kingship in a subtler way. *Beowulf* provides an image of the failures of bad monarchy by depicting an example of the problems of bestowing power on a single, fallible, person. Both *Kingdom of Heaven* and *Return of the King* can be interpreted as parables about what leadership should and should not be. Ideas about the monarchy differed

within the focus groups; each person had their own ideas on what makes a person seem like a medieval king, and what attributes make a medieval king good or bad.

### **The ideal king**

The image of the king was important to many participants. To Justin, a key difference between Hrothgar and Beowulf was that while *Beowulf* ruled, he fit the expected image: '[he] was there in his armour on his horse with the red shirt and was, he looked more kingly'. His focus group then went on to identify a series of visual signifiers which, to them, implied kingship, all of which were reflected in the film. These included 'the armour', 'the size [...] a tall buff man', 'a massive [...] chest', 'grey hair' (specifically 'distinguished grey hair, no baldness'), 'a white horse', 'a quality crown'. Katy added 'I can see the grey hair bit and the crown, but, kind of in red as well. I kind of always imagine kings in red' to which Sean added 'It's kind of a noble colour in a way, isn't it?' Stephen concluded the conversation by saying,

The way that Beowulf was dressed in relation to his life, in relation to the people around him is much more distinct from the first king and the people around him. The way the first king was dressed was quite similar to how everyone else was dressed, so yeah. So it's not the qualities to make a king that you have to have a red shirt and grey hair and stuff but I suppose it's a quick visual signifier isn't it? For a Hollywood hero.

So in addition to this list, Beowulf was an appropriate and identifiable king not just because he fulfilled their list of visual signifiers, but because he was dressed in a manner significantly different from those around him. The May focus made a list of the physical attributes of a medieval king: 'beardy' (specifically a 'clean-shaven [trimmed] beard'), 'crown', 'whopping great big sword', 'nice shiny plate maille', 'gold armour', and 'kitted out ceremonially'.

Some participants focused upon the body of the king: 'it's shorthand isn't it, someone big and tall and with armour and the buff body walks on screen you know that he's the hero, rather than having to explain that this short little fat man, he's going to be the hero. Watch him!' To John the stature of the king reflects the state of the Kingdom: 'if it's a really peaceful area and there's not that much fighting, the king's gonna be, fat basically. But if it's like, if it's, for example, if a

kingdom's gone to set up a colony to go and claim land, the king or the leader of that area is going to be a physical guy who can fight, 'cause that's what's needed'. To John the king and the kingdom are tied; if the kingdom is prosperous, the king will be fat, if the kingdom is at war, the king will be ready for war. John, Dan and Mark then continued to explain that, even though they held the idea that fatness was attractive during the Middle Ages, it would always be prudent for the king to be physically fit:

- John: In our eyes it's a bit different I suppose 'cause it was quite fashionable to be fat in the past because it meant you could afford food [...] you had money. But I, I know I suppose in our eyes we associate fat people with being greedy, and then they'd show the king like with the scene in the films stuffin' their faces, which makes us think bad. May not be the case. [...]
- Dan: Fat kings generally get shown as bad or ill-prepared because if there's a change of circumstance to a physically fit king as in they go from war to peace that's fine then they can get fat. Whereas if a fat person is suddenly, war is at their doorstep, they're unprepared, they can't fight, they're gonna get shown just as this fool who's become lardy and can't do anything.
- Mark: While a physically fit king is probably going to want to stay that way.

Many participants had a specific physical ideal of kingship that coincided with how kings are presented by the films. A good king should be physically fit, bearded and mature. These physical qualities were also linked with more ephemeral ideals of kingship: the king should be an alpha warrior, a paragon of restrained masculinity and a wise administrator.

### **The ideals of the king: Rightness and right to rule**

A king is not just a man who wears a crown, but a ruler. Each film provided examples of good and bad rulership, and participants responded differently to the actions of each. Some participants constructed an image of the moral ideal of a medieval king. Many of these ideals were similar to those expressed about knighthood (above, p. 234), but some were unique.

When asked what non-physical qualities implied kingship, Stephen said, 'the logical answer is the qualities that make a king are that he is the son of another king, or has been left the throne and so because of genetics it could be anyone'. John also felt that the kings in these films

did not correspond with his ideas of medieval kings because only in *Return of the King* was the issue of royal dynasty explored: 'they had [...] the king being in like in like a bloodline or you, sort of like in the family. I know in Beowulf anyway [he]'s kinda became the king just 'cause he was, 'cause he, saved the the town, whatever. But I'm trying to think in most cases they're predetermined kings, which seems a bit more historically accurate'.

Justin felt that the qualities of kingship were personal or moral characteristics: 'I think when you see these big castles and these big armies you expect someone at the top to have some kind of qualities [...] physical presence [...] and a commanding quality'. Justin then listed: 'nobleness, uh, power, uh, ability to command people I suppose. Dunno. I suppose that's where the story was interesting, I suppose, because Beowulf was the hero, but he turned out the fallible. So I suppose it is a film about the nature of what, is a king really elevated above everybody else?' To Justin, a king's elevated social status implies that they must also be morally elevated, and therefore Beowulf's fallibility was a significant deviation from the generic norm. Erica also implied that a king should seem morally and physically strong: 'most of the kings in these [films] have been weak [...] either physically in last night's movie with the leprosy and stuff, um, in the first one both the weak kings were weak because of the temptation of the monster'. Guy de Lusignan, to her, was weak because he 'wanted to do and go to battle for his own reasons and not exactly, yeah didn't think about his kingdom at all, but only for selfish, selfish reasons'. So to her, a good medieval king is strong physically and morally, and thinks of his kingdom before himself.

### **Aggressive or pacifist kings?**

One of the primary indicators of good or bad kingship cited by the participants was how a king approaches war. Is the approach aggressive or pacifistic? Robert saw the two kings of *Kingdom of Heaven* as exemplifying the traits which define a good king and a bad one. To him, Guy de Lusignan was 'the ambitious sort of king who's greedy, wants power [...] the other king [Baldwin IV] [...] was kind of keeping the peace, intelligent'. Jess, Jake and John agreed; to them, Baldwin



was a good medieval king because 'he didn't want to like fight or anything he just wanted to allow people like Muslims into the city and, he just wanted to live in peace together'. Guy, on the other hand, 'always wanted to like, to have a war and be victorious and have like victories and be perceived as a hero sort of thing'. They argued a good king 'shouldn't seek out fighting, should he? He shouldn't go out and just like start wars for no reason or just a flimsy excuse'. These participants reacted positively to *Kingdom of Heaven* because they felt that a necessary quality for good kingship was pacifism, and a bad medieval king would 'just be out for like jollies and glory'.

### **The people**

Many participants felt that the king's relationship with his subjects was of paramount importance. Chloe said a good king 'needs the respect from the people and for the people'. The May group's collaboratively-compiled list of attributes of good kingship focussed on this: an ideal medieval king 'should seek to protect his people', and 'should be the ultimate servant', and would 'make sure within the walls of your kingdom that they [the subjects] are safe'. To this group, *Kingdom of Heaven* gives prime examples of good and bad kingship centrally defined by how the king protects and serves his subjects. They defined the primary trait of a bad king as 'selfishness'. A bad king would be 'someone who doesn't look out for his people. Like, if they've got no food, then you're a bad king. Like, if they're dying, you're a bad king'. Carin also felt that the central role of a king is to protect his people: 'Orlando's Bloom character was [a king] in a way because he defended the people even though he wasn't a king'.

This idea of protecting and serving the people stems in part from the film itself. Balian was seen to be a good ruler because he set up an irrigation system on his land (so ensuring that his subjects are well-fed), and fought the climactic battle over Jerusalem to 'protect his people' rather than for religion, for glory or to protect the city itself. Godfrey commands his newly-knighted son: 'if the King is dead, protect the people'. Balian justifies a suicidal charge against the Muslim cavalry because 'if we withdraw, these people [the fleeing peasants] will die'. At the conclusion of

the climactic eve-of-battle speech, Balian announces 'We defend this city, not to protect these stones, but the people living within these walls'. *Kingdom of Heaven's* obsession with 'protecting the people' seems to have had significant impact upon participants' perception of the attributes of a good king, since they repeated the film's ideological position almost verbatim. This obviously did not conflict with their previous knowledge; its foregrounding may have caused the participants to repeat the film's perspective as though it were their own.

### **King's rule**

The May focus group agreed that a king should 'reign well'. When asked how a king might go about doing this, Dan and Mark said that a king should 'Not [go] round picking fights unless they need to', 'good administration', and 'keeping promises they make to people who've the power to curse them to living death'. When asked what they meant by good administration, Dan cited Theoden again:

Designating specific authorities to like, like with Theoden we saw that he had several captains which also branched down to various other lower levels who also managed to bring in the men, um, in order to have his decision carried. A clear hierarchy.

This group described the virtues of kingship in the way that one might describe a good office manager or supervisor. Laura said that to her 'the whole concept of the king is centred around leading people [...] the concept of a power-hungry king, that's not really compatible with what a king is'. To Dan, the essence of a king is 'he makes the decisions he has the authority, and the backing of the populace [...] kings lose backing, then they very often stop being kings'. Dan has injected a sense of democracy into medieval kingship that seems similar to the role of the Prime Minister in the British parliament, where a vote of confidence could divest the king of his power. As a result, in his mind, true power rests with the populace. While medieval kings were sometimes deposed by rivals, even the large-scale popular revolts during the Later Middle Ages (such as the

Jacquerie in France and the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 in England) did not conclude with a change of monarch.<sup>382</sup>

Laura defined a medieval kingship as 'in comparison to now, it would be less a symbol and more someone who actually does things. [...] I think a medieval king would be more involved in what went on'. When asked to specify, she had difficulty: 'Um, decision-making so that there weren't people arguing all over the place and there was a final decision and things and, probably, I don't know. And, I don't know, stuff like that just generally being a leader in terms of things rather, you know, someone at the forefront of everything'. In short, the participants felt strongly that a medieval king would be an active and able ruler and administrator, and yet had difficulty explaining how they might do this. They used generic terms to describe their concepts but gave few specific examples. This is unsurprising, considering that most films and popular cultural representations of kingship focus far more upon effective leadership in battle than on effective leadership in peace.

### **King as alpha-warrior**

It is a common film trope for heroic kings to lead their troops into battle while evil kings watch from afar. Each of the three films shown here uses this trope: each good king (or those, like Balian, who are placed in kingly roles) is shown to be an alpha-warrior who leads from the front, whereas bad kings are either portrayed as incapable warriors or men who lead from the rear. As a result, many participants saw one of the primary royal qualities to be aggression and personal combat prowess.

John related the concept of a medieval king as alpha-warrior to the alpha-male in the animal kingdom:

With certain species you'll have two, you'll have two of the strongest males fightin' out for the choice of the females and whatnot and they'll be generally regarded as the, the the, could say the leader. [...] And it's probably not too dissimilar with some of the earl- early

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<sup>382</sup> Claire Valente, *The Theory and Practice of Revolt in Medieval England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 1-14.

medieval groups I would have thought. Cause a lot of the case it was the best fighter, and they'd expect the king to be the best fighter as well I suppose. Obviously it's not the case now because, kind of got over that stage of everything just being about physical.

To him, the difference between medieval and modern is the focus on physicality and personal strength; during the Middle Ages it was natural for the role of the king to be filled by the best warrior. It seems that he is implying that medieval people are more animalistic than contemporary society; he sees modern culture as superior because society has 'got over that stage', as if these are childish or immature social behaviours best left behind.

Some saw kingship in certain characters' behaviour on the battlefield. For example to Erica, 'A good king is good because he stays and fights with the troops and he leads them all, em, a bad king is selfish and stays in his little tower, and orders troops, or doesn't order troops, panics, and doesn't order troops, and, em, then yeah, stays and doesn't really fight himself'. To Erica, a king's primary role is as war-leader and warrior; she here was alluding to the Steward of Gondor as a negative example. She also thought Hrothgar was a bad king because 'he was paying people to do his fighting, battles for him, he never actually went and fought'. John cited Aragorn as an appropriate king because in the battle at the Black Gate at the end of the film, 'He's the first one in isn't he [...] he's the first one in'. But John is wrong—he has constructed a false memory of Aragorn being first in the fray. The film, in a playful subversion, depicts hobbits Merry and Pippin, who have proven themselves to be (for lack of a better term) omega-warriors throughout the films, as the first to charge the enemy here. John may have misremembered because, in his view, as a good king Aragorn was required to lead the charge, whether he actually did or not.

These participants had their knowledge of the archetypal medieval king reinforced by the portrayals of kings in the films. Even when these portrayals seem contradictory (like the requirement that a king be both peaceable and aggressive), participants generally accepted both realities with little critical comparison or sense of contradiction. The three films seemed to construct a multi-faceted image of kingship in terms of the physical expectations of a king and also the expectations in terms of leadership on and off the battlefield. Many of these ideas are anachronistic, being either drawn entirely from the films, or projected from current expectations of military or political leaders onto medieval ones.

### **Landscape and geography**

Historical films, especially epics, are particularly reliant upon landscape: sweeping shots of the land are used to imply the large scope of the action and to establish the geographically- and chronologically-distant setting. Second only to the actors, the depiction of landscape is often the dominant visual element and acts as shorthand for the wider world represented by the film. Our three films are no exceptions; each makes use of landscape shots, especially in battle scenes. The participants often described how the landscapes in the films related to their expectations of the medieval landscape. They also reacted strongly to related issues, including their perception of connected geographies, travel, and navigation.

### **Built and natural landscapes**

Every natural landscape within these films is, ironically, artificial. *Kingdom of Heaven's* Middle Eastern landscape was filmed in Morocco, and as a result depicts the cities of the Holy Land rising out of a north-Saharan desert. *Return of the King* was filmed entirely in New Zealand (either outside or on a sound studio); the land formations and flora of that country are not European, and many seen in the film were man-made. The dramatic New Zealand landscapes captured (or created) for Middle-Earth lend the story a feeling of exaggerated reality; for audience members

not native to the Antipodes, they give it an uncanny feel. As for *Beowulf*, this landscape is the most artificial of all: the action does not take place anywhere except within the electrons of the computers which rendered it.<sup>383</sup> As a result, every inch of landscape seen on screen was put there by a filmmaker.

As we have seen, some participants were unsure whether *Beowulf* was medieval or pre-medieval, their doubt being based upon the extent to which landscape and society were developed. Participants were unsure whether the landscape and geography of the film were medieval. For example, in her analysis, Jess found that the film depicted something other than the Middle Ages because the built landscape differed from the Middle Ages, which to her began ‘when like they started building proper castles, this time, like the tower of London, that’s when that was built and like actual big stone castles, that’s what I think of Middle Ages, like castles, and then like you know like outgoing villages and farming’. John and Dan defined the period similarly:

John: I always imagine like, ‘s whole towns, most buildings made out of wood. Built around a castle, surrounded by a countryside.

Mod: Surrounded by a countryside, okay.

Dan: I imagine that but more woodland rather than countryside.

Mod: More woodland, okay.

Dan: Whenever you look at other countries where they’re not especially developed it’s woodland. Whereas here the woodlands are specific areas, you know, who’s going to cut it down if it’s not populated? I think more woodland.

Dan’s knowledge of the medieval landscape centres on the idea that it lacked development; to him, the population of the Middle Ages was so low (and land-use was similarly sparse) that wildwood would have dominated. This is a common misconception which is a product of (and contributes to) the perception of the Middle Ages as a barbaric time before, science and industry had tamed the natural world. In reality, the majority of the wild woodland of Britain had been

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<sup>383</sup> See discussion in chapter 4, at p. 77.

cleared by the close of the Bronze Age, and most medieval woodland was closely managed for timber or hunting.<sup>384</sup> Contemporary Britain has more woodland than medieval Britain.<sup>385</sup>

### Travel and travail

While the action of *Beowulf* is more-or-less geographically static (never venturing too far from Heorot), *Lord of the Rings* and *Kingdom of Heaven* depict stories of travel into foreign climes. Both follow a traditional 'there and back again' or 'exile and return' structure, in which heroes venture away from home into the place of adventure, returning once their adventure is complete (though in both they find themselves so changed that they cannot resume their old lives). Both also depict the realities, and difficulties, of medieval travel.

Chloe and Erica dwelled on the difficulty of travel in the films. They believed that land in the Middle Ages was trackless, a place where navigation was impossible except through vague directions. They quote from *Kingdom of Heaven* and *Lord of the Rings* to support this view.

Erica: Yeah there was no em, signs to anywhere. Like, whenever they give directions it was always like go to the part where they speak Italian or=

Chloe: =three days gallop away=

Erica: =yeah. You'd never, nothing's really mapped out and there's no signs to anywhere. Whereas if that happened today everybody would just get lost every single time they left the house.

There are no roads in *Beowulf*, and the sea limns the action as a grim barrier, one that is never treated casually; travel on it is shown to be perilous due to ever-present storms and sea monsters. Heroes come from the sea and go there when they die. In *Kingdom of Heaven*, the action begins at a crossroads. After the opening in Europe, Balian begins his crusade on a road, but soon the paths dissolve and the way becomes confused. Balian is given only these directions to the holy land by his father: 'You go to where the men speak Italian, then go to where they speak something else'.

<sup>384</sup> Tony Brown, 'Clearances and Clearings: Deforestation in Mesolithic/Neolithic Britain', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 16 (1997), 133-146. Cf. Christopher Taylor, *Village and Farmstead: A History of Rural Settlement in England* (London: George Philip, 1984).

<sup>385</sup> Leonard Cantor, 'Forests, Chases, Parks and Warrens', in *The English Medieval Landscape* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), pp. 56-85 (pp. 56-65); Oliver Rackham, *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape*, Revised Edition (London: Phoenix Giant, 1996) chapter 4.

He endures a shipwreck and finds himself in a trackless desert of a Middle Eastern land where he must make his own paths, literally and metaphorically. *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy compasses a journey from pastoral to militant epic, from the present the medieval. The shire (where the action begins) is a Victorian pastoral ideal: a land of roads, paths and tamed rural landscape. As the hobbits journey into the unknown, the paths melt away as civilisation disappears and the characters find themselves ranging over endless vistas of medieval-ish New Zealand-ish countryside. By the action of *Return of the King*, the roads have all but disappeared. As they travel out of Rohan, Gandalf describes the kingdom of Gondor as being ‘three days ride away, as the Nazgul flies’. In this medieval world, they gallop, walk or fly over trackless open country.

When asked whether these depictions were reflective of medieval reality, Erica seemed convinced.

‘Yeah they would have had maps because even at the end of *Lord of the Rings* they showed a map. But it didn’t have distances on it [...] like nobody’d ever studied the land that well to be able to say, you know, go five miles northeast and you’ll get to this certain space and then you go. It’s always like, travel for a couple of days and if they don’t speak Italian you’ve gone the wrong way’.

Carin agreed— in principle, ‘I think people were like in order to have like, a vague sense of which direction things were in, there would have been maps and, I don’t know, some kind of vague idea’. Here Erica mixed information learned from *Return of the King* and *Kingdom of Heaven* and applied it to her understanding of medieval navigation. While Carin said that people would have an intuitive sense of the way between places, she did not revise Erica’s opinion.

Some participants were surprised that all of these films included scenes of sea travel. Jess and Mark reported learning from *Kingdom of Heaven* that many crusaders travelled to Outremer by ship. Jess said ‘I’ve never thought how they got to Jerusalem on the Crusades. For some reason I just imagined they walked or got on their horse the entire time. So when he got on a boat I was really surprised’. To this, Mark added ‘same here, I thought they did go by, I was fairly sure they did go by foot’. It is possible they gained this idea that crusades were conducted primarily over land from the history of the First Crusade, which did proceed primarily on land. However, once



Jerusalem was captured and the Kingdom of Jerusalem established (including the ports of Acre and Ascalon), travel by sea to the crusader states became commonplace. The Second and Third Crusades both had contingents who travelled by sea.<sup>386</sup>

Here the film conflicted with the idea that the sea, and by extension sea travel, is not a part of the public understanding of the Middle Ages.<sup>387</sup> If they believed that the Middle Ages were set in an English or generic pastoral landscape, or they felt that the Middle Ages were a time of limited mobility, it is unsurprising that the presence of sea travel might seem surprising. Their (literally) insular viewpoint may have contributed to this: if a person lives on an island and believes that the Middle Ages only happened on that island, lack of sea travel is implicit in this worldview. The fact that *The Lord of the Rings* (both novel and film) only infrequently reference sea travel (and even then as a metaphor for death), may contribute to the baseline understanding of the Middle Ages as landlocked. Ultimately though, these participants decided to believe that the presentation of sea travel in the film was more reflective of historical reality than their knowledge.

### **Landmarks: The castle**

The most significant feature of the medieval built environment, to most participants, was the castle. To John, the castle is so central that, 'they wouldn't really put a village in a place without castles in it'. To him, castles were so common during the Middle Ages that any human settlement would have had one. Of course, this was not the case; the idea may have been generated because towns which are marketed for tourists as having medieval heritage are often those which have a castle or the ruins of one.

Justin also felt that the setting of *Beowulf* did not seem medieval, because: 'I've never seen a movie where it has, in that kind of location, completely, in the middle of nowhere. I think of

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<sup>386</sup> Tyerman, pp. 400-401.

<sup>387</sup> This might be due to the fact that navigational science is one of the defining features of the modern age. For example, David Waters notes that the invention of scientific measurement, developed by navigators to calculate their position at sea, helps distinguish the Early Modern Period from the Middle Ages. See: David Watkin Waters, *The Iberian Bases of the English Art of Navigation in the Sixteenth Century* (Coimbra: University of Coimbra General Library, 1970), pp. 1-19, 5.

somewhere that was more sprawling'. Justin felt similarly, as he laid out in the following exchange:

- Justin: I wouldn't imagine it to be that close to the sea for a start, on the edge of a cliff and stuff.
- Stephen: Yeah. For some reason that's, I don't know why that surprised me, I just wasn't expecting, everywhere just seemed to be really close to the sea=
- Justin: =yeah, and I just expect to be more, maybe more agricultural, maybe seeing a bit more, and a bit, bit more sort of townsy and more, just, just great, I dunno. Square mileage. Dunno.
- Mod: So, so, where is the Middle Ages to you?
- Justin: I suppose it's everywhere, it's just I've never really seen it though. So when I think of it, I think of it more centralised in the country and stuff.

The bleak Scandinavian landscape of *Beowulf* was surprising, not only because the sea (a feature not commonly associated with the Middle Ages by these participants) was dominant, but also because the snowy landscape did not bear evidence of agriculture. If *Beowulf* were medieval, surmised Justin, one would expect 'a bunch of agricultural things that you could see, like ploughed fields and things like that. I didn't expect it to be built settlements like uh, like I saw in that film, I expected it to be much grander'. On the other hand, Justin and Stephen later agreed that the city of Minas Tirith in *Return of the King* was not medieval because it was 'too grand':

- Justin: I'm pretty, yeah, yeah. But I can't, I can't imagine that in any medieval world because it's just too, it's too grand.
- Stephen: I can see what you mean it's too grand, it's kind of modelled, it seems modelled after some kind of medieval thing. [...] the doors of the city, they look like Cathedral doors and, bits looked like church 'cause they've got the kind of panels with the, statues of people in them that look probably in this movie they're not saints but they look like, it's that, it looks like a church.

If Heorot was too squalid, and Minas Tirith was too grand, just right, it seems, was Edoras, the city of the Rohirrim in *Return of the King*. Even though they had some trouble identifying it, (Sean referring to it as 'the kind of wooden one on the hill'), Justin and Stephen both agreed that 'Yeah, that seems medieval'.

John also reacted negatively to the Scandinavian setting of *Beowulf*. To him it was not depicted as he would have expected Denmark to be, 'it seemed to be snowing quite a lot, yeah, I

wouldn't say there was that much in Denmark. Next to the sea as well. So yeah, next to the sea there wouldn't be that much. [...] they built a castle as well [...]right up against the seafront, and that I know that would never happen; they would never build a castle where they basically back themselves up against a wall'. John felt that the film's landscape was implausible both because it did not correspond with his knowledge of Denmark's landscape and weather, but also because it conflicted with his understanding of medieval battle tactics. Contrary to John's statement, medieval castles were frequently built in coastal locations and along waterways, either to facilitate resupply or evacuation, as coastal defence, to control entrance and exit to the kingdom, or as a method to supervise trade. Edward I's 'ring of iron' castles around the coast of Wales are examples.<sup>388</sup>

Stephen and Justin furthermore used the Scandinavian setting to draw a complex, if incorrect, conclusion about the historical provenance of the poem:

Stephen: I presume it was set in Scandinavia, the film.  
 Justin: Yeah.  
 Stephen: I always imagined the Anglo-Saxons being in=  
 Justin: =in Britain=  
 Stephen: =Britain. And I thought, oh yeah, well, it makes sense yeah, big snowy place, sea, storms, crap weather.

Based upon their understanding that the film was set in Scandinavia (supported by both the subtitle which places the setting in 'Denmark' and also the snowy seascapes), and their previous knowledge that *Beowulf* is an Anglo-Saxon poem, they drew the incorrect conclusion that the Anglo-Saxons must have lived in Scandinavia as well as in Britain. When asked what aspects of the film were not medieval to him, Robert first cited the setting. He went on to show evidence of negotiating his previous expectations in the following interchange:

Robert: When we'd said, like, medieval, we associate it with Britain, but obviously that was in Denmark. So,  
 Chloe: Mmm.  
 Robert: I don't know it was kind of a mixture.

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<sup>388</sup> A. J. Taylor, *The Welsh Castles of Edward I* (London: Hambledon, 1986); D. J. Cathcart King, *The Castle in England and Wales: An Interpretive History* (London: Routledge, 1991).

Chloe: Looking at the Vikings, almost.

Robert: Yeah.

Mod: Mhmm. So, are the Vikings, do the Vikings seem medieval to you or no?

Robert: They didn't before, I put them under the Middle Ages.

To Robert, 'medieval' included Britain but not Denmark, and 'Middle Ages' included Vikings whereas medieval did not. However, his statement 'they didn't before' implies that he may have revised his opinion as a result of what he saw in *Beowulf*.

### **The built environment and the medieval community**

Some participants saw the films' built environments as reflective of social structures; this they consistently labelled as a particularly medieval feature of the films. When Chloe was asked what was particularly medieval about *Return of the King*, she said, 'Big kingdoms with big castles, live in a big building. Big settlements that were together'. When asked to clarify, she said 'everyone lives in the same place. They're all very integrated'. When asked, she explained that "integrated" means 'probably everybody needs each other because everybody has a trade, so you've got the blacksmith and the carpenter and, everybody has a role, almost, and you've got families, em, and you all work together and live together, rather than modern day where it's all quite separate'. To Chloe, the built environment is both product and cause of the social culture: large walled cities imply a sort of communal levelling of social strata, and a closed community requires that collectivist nature. This relates to the above-described idea that medieval people lived and worked collectively.

Chloe added that this compares to the individualism of modernity, 'people are more individual now. You work for yourself whereas before it was, you're...' Carin finished, 'Part of the community'. To Carin, the built environment of isolated walled communities was a similarity between *Kingdom of Heaven* and *Return of the King*:

The two of them, today and yesterday, it was all, everything was surrounded by the main walls, and em, yeah. Everything, everybody was together, and if they needed help, they called upon it and other sectioned-off communities came and helped. [...] they could get

people from outside the walls to help, but yeah. More sense of doing it for your community than doing it for yourself'.

To them, the cities of *Kingdom of Heaven* and *Return of the King* are models of medieval communalism, where everyone in the local community worked towards common goals, and where aid came from other similarly-isolated communities. The salient different between these films and *Beowulf* is that, to Erica, *Beowulf* was a smaller community focused on the unit of the 'hall' rather than the 'city': 'you could say that was kinda like the same thing cause like everybody et [ate] and drank and had a good time, but [...] it wasn't like a city, it was just a hall'.

### **Agriculture**

Even though agrarian society and agriculture epitomise the Middle Ages, only *Kingdom of Heaven* depicts farming. However, *Return of the King's* landscape had greenery, and Stephen felt this made it more medieval than *Beowulf's* because: 'it could just be simply that [...] *Beowulf* was a snowy, waste essentially, but there was greenery in Rohan'. Justin countered, 'but it didn't look like fields that was being harvested in any way. It just looked like a field'. Stephen assumed that there must be some kind of agriculture going on, even if the film did not depict it, 'maybe not advanced agriculture but, I would assume there would be maybe some crops'. To these two, agriculture is *so* necessary for the medieval landscape that they were willing to imagine its existence in something which they labelled medieval, even if the film did not explicitly show it. For Katy, the landscape of *Return of the King* seemed medieval because agriculture is implied by open spaces:

Mostly I always think of agriculture and the big, kind of, churches and buildings and grand, actually I think of grand buildings, um but in the middle of nowhere. And that was just fields around and it's the fields I think that's the kind of setting, not seeing, with it not being built up I just assume agricultural. Um, maybe yeah and that was what was in *Lord of the Rings* in terms of where it was set would be what I probably expected for medieval.

Katy went on to explain what sort of landscape was not medieval: 'I, I don't ever imagine, em, medieval films to be set in kind of big towns and cities. I just always, I think it's 'cause of

battlefields when you think of battle you think of battlefields and them coming together, in the fields and the agriculture, I don't know why'. To Katy, the medieval landscape comprises grand buildings in the middle of large swaths of empty fertile land, ripe for battles to be staged in them. The fields are filled with either crops or corpses, but never both at the same time. Urbanity is not a feature of the Middle Ages.

In many ways this is how the medieval natural landscape is depicted in the three films: there are many battles, and while all of them take place on large tracts of land, none of which is being used for anything other than battle. While this may be due to the necessities of filmmaking (planting crops only so they can be trampled by your army of extras seems illogical), it does create a peculiar image of the medieval landscape and medieval warfare.

### **Geography: Are the Middle Ages English?**

Participants responded strongly to their perception of the abstract geographies of the films. As discussed (p. 126), many participants identified the Middle Ages with England or Britain and as primarily involving English or British people. However, none of these films is set in Britain, and none have English or British characters (as discussed, p. 191).<sup>389</sup> Jess reported that her ideas were challenged by *Kingdom of Heaven*. 'What surprised me was that they were French. Like, that guy, Balian or whatever it was, Orlando Bloom, like, he was French and they came from France. I don't know why, but I just assumed they'd be English. I mean I forgot there was others all over the place, like it was quite obvious when that German guy turned up as well. Like, but that was like an initial surprise to me'. Mark agreed, saying, 'I was expecting that but maybe that's a little stupid'. Even when participants acknowledge that their knowledge is incorrect, the instinct to expect English medieval narratives stands uncorrected. To this group, *Kingdom of Heaven* also revealed a

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<sup>389</sup> The one exception is King Richard I of England, who makes a cameo appearance at the end of *Kingdom of Heaven*. However he plays no role other than as a vehicle used to show that Balian is unwilling to repeat the mistake of crusade even at the behest of a king.

trend where non-English characters in medieval film are depicted as English. For example, Jake stated,

That's more to do with the actual, like, the actual sort of filmmakers are sort of how, more, it's English-speaking, um, you'd obviously, you'd have more the English being sort of the leads [...] they're obviously French but they're speaking English and they didn't even put on like a faux French accent or anything.

Jess agreed, saying that 'Except for the stupid names like Guy and whatever Reynard or whatever his name was, like, I forgot they were French'. To these participants, the Middle Ages are set in England partly because characters in medieval films which they have seen do not bear any of the signifiers of foreignness. Their foreignness can even be forgotten, which may not be a bad thing considering how distracting many participants found the accents used in *Beowulf* to be (p. 190).

Dan voiced the sole exception to the notion that the Middle Ages relate to England. Dan saw the crusade as an international phenomenon: 'I thought it was, a good representation of what the Crusades [were]. I didn't think that the Crusaders were predominantly English so [I looked at it] from the point of view that the Crusades were something that united Europe under Catholicism generally, so it was a team effort (laugh) for Europe'. Though his view was not universally accepted, for those of the participants who saw the Middle Ages as primarily an English phenomenon, these films offered a revision. It is difficult to ascertain whether that revision was accepted as an exception to the rule or as a new rule altogether.

Overall, the participants gleaned a wide range of information (and misinformation) about the landscape, whether natural, built, geographical or political, of the Middle Ages from their experience with these films. At times their ideas were challenged and at others they were reinforced. This frequently caused participants to cite the films as authoritative.

## **Religion**

Each of the films treated medieval religion differently. In *Beowulf*, religion is used only to establish period and to show cultural and temporal change. In *Kingdom of Heaven*, religion is brought to the

fore; religious zeal which leads to holy war can be read as the veiled antagonist of the film. *Return of the King* deals with religion more obliquely; one of the defining features of medievalist fantasy is its frequent replacement of Christian religion with invented pantheons or magic. Though Gandalf discusses life after death with Pippin, Christianity (or any form of organised Church) does not exist in Middle Earth. This caused some participants to argue over whether Gandalf was 'magical' or 'spiritual' in nature, with no definitive conclusion reached.

Participants saw the presence of religion in the films as a key marker of medievalness and historical accuracy. Congruent with this, they ruled depictions of medieval people being religiously unenthusiastic to be historically inaccurate. Sean commented on how little *Beowulf* included religion, 'I was surprised by some of the, um, the Christian references actually, and that they were kind of negative in a way [...] I tend to think of everyone being really overly [...] religious. And not really, um, not really questioning the church in that sense'. Chloe also felt that religion in *Beowulf* was 'completely ignored, which I think it probably wasn't back then'. Erica thought 'you'd think they'd be more like focused on that [religion] but it's like "no it's fine" kind of shunned it off, and [...] it wasn't historically correct'. Justin, Stephen and Sean felt the negative depiction of religion in two of the films was 'strange':

- Justin: [...] with *Kingdom of Heaven* you definitely saw that religions were very, the, very important and it did dictate a lot and, if you compare it to *Beowulf*, in that you didn't really see much religion but you saw the growth of one but you didn't really see how something really getting its claws into how things run
- Stephen: Yeah, it's really strange though because in *Kingdom of Heaven* there was really only one priest or Bishop or whatever, solely. There wasn't many
- Justin: And he was a coward as well
- Stephen: And he was a coward, but I don't think, I may have been forgetting but I don't think there were any more priests in that, other than the one he killed right at the beginning.

To them, the depiction of religion is 'strange' in these two films, because in *Beowulf*, the audience is not shown a powerful centralised church that had gotten 'its claws into how things run'. In *Kingdom of Heaven*, the depiction of medieval religion is strange because all recognisably clerical characters are shown to be corrupt.



One of the things Erica felt was most medieval about *Kingdom of Heaven* was that it depicted Christian religious practices and attitudes that seemed alien:

The way that um, that death was addressed. Like the religion and stuff, where like, they were 'burn the bodies' and the priest saying 'you can't do that', 'cause it's not the right way to bury them. Like, you wouldn't have got people saying that now [...] that seemed pretty like medieval [...] Like as well, like, when right at the beginning where Orlando Bloom's wife got her head chopped off and stuff so she would, so she would be headless in hell and stuff like that, it kind of, yeah there's a lot more, like, religious, em, aspects to death than like you would get now [...] a lot more, em, yeah, more myth around death and heaven and hell than there is now.

Erica perceives medieval Christianity to have more ritual, ceremony and 'myth' involved than current Christianity, and she sees death as having been divested of ritual in the modern world.

Robert also compared medieval religious belief and practice to its modern counterparts:

These days it's... not so black and white like, you can kinda believe in Christianity but not believe everything about it, but that's more like they believe that you were going to hell, so the practices in their lives were kind of designed towards that belief: heaven and hell.

A main difference between the medieval and modern psyche is that, to Robert, medieval people believed every aspect of Christianity, whereas modern people pick and choose the aspects of their religion in which they wish to believe. Justin assumed that religion was important to people even if it was not made explicit in the film. To him, religion 'was important in people's lives, because you know Balian went up to, where Christ was executed, sort of sat there all night as a kind of I don't know, because his wife got kill- his wife committed suicide'.

Dan and Mark had a poor opinion of medieval religious practices (as discussed previously, p. 160). They felt that *Kingdom of Heaven* accurately depicted the Middle Ages as a time when corrupt clergymen misused scripture to their own ends, and that the populace did not understand Christianity properly.

Dan: Uh, I think it displayed a lot of, I'm not sure whether it was genuine ignorance from the time, of Christianity, but there's a lot of that in there=

Mark: =well, bear in mind that the Latin Bible was in Latin and most peasants couldn't even read their native language so, there was a lot of ways for scripture to be misused.

Dan: Well, it didn't even need to be blatantly misused, it was just fed to people and they wouldn't even know most of it was=

Mark: =okay, let me rephrase this, they didn't even need scripture, scripture didn't even need to be used, mis- or otherwise, to, they could just say what they want to because nobody could contradict them. [...]

Dan: Not sure whether that would have been genuine, I couldn't, I couldn't believe that was genuine in that there was very little knowledge of what Christianity was about.

They felt the film emphasised the ignorance (or intentional miscarriage) of the medieval clergy of what Mark and Dan presumed to be the central tenets of Christianity. Thus, medieval Christianity is not a different interpretation of Christianity, but rather a 'misused' Christianity which was fed to a helpless, ignorant public. Dan was also unsure of whether this was 'genuine' (meaning historically accurate), or an invention by the filmmakers; however, they both leaned towards the idea that it was an authentic depiction. The participants therefore demonstrated an ahistorical view of Christianity, where the values they perceive to be central to Christianity and the Christian practices with which they are familiar are the 'correct' ones. As a result medieval piety is regarded as a perversion or ignorance of the 'truth'.

### **Middle-Earth religion?**

One of the most pronounced differences between *Return of the King* and the other films is the issue of religion. Tolkien himself reflected: 'The only criticism that annoyed me was one that it "contained no religion" [...] It is a monotheistic world of "natural theology"'. The odd fact that there are no churches, temples, or religious rites and ceremonies is simply part of the historical climate depicted'.<sup>390</sup> The June focus group agreed both with Tolkien's unnamed critics and Tolkien's rebuttal: they argued that there was no explicit religion, except 'the sense of a higher power', 'not a creator god but something', and 'there was a belief that there was more. But there wasn't so much of a structure to focus that belief'. So they saw religion in *Return of the King*, even without a church.

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<sup>390</sup> Tolkien, *Letters*, p. 220.

Justin said that religion was evident in the film 'because you had all these small, small players like Gandalf who did these amazing things, and you had that Orb thing that that, you know what I mean, just, there's a very spiritual-' Stephen interrupted with 'and the kind of miracles, but I don't think it's a very religious link'. Stephen and Justin here interpret the magic of *Return of the King* as religious: Gandalf's spells are 'miracles' and the Palantir is labelled religious. Mark also felt that 'Gandalf is sort of both priest and wizard, in this episode'. Gandalf is a priest because,

for example right at the end you would have had, you had him crowning Aragorn and traditional that's a role the, is it [what] the Archbishop of Westminster would do [...] he's also sort of if my memory of Tolkien's work, books are concerned, he's also sort of one of the messengers of the gods and he's also got all these mystical names associated with him which is sort of very medieval priest though, as he's going into sort of more mystical territories.

To Mark, Gandalf is similar to a medieval priest both in his role at coronation and his ties to mysticism. Mark then explained that medieval priests are mystical because 'they would have been sort of normally the only one in the village who could read [...] Words certainly have power and if you can understand the words then you might be able to use some of that quote unquote power'. So, to Mark, Gandalf's power is directly related to that of the priest because both undertake activities that Mark believes would be considered mystical by ignorant medieval villagers.

Erica was one of the few to take the opposite viewpoint. To her, in *Return of the King*

They didn't go into it [religion], whereas the other two films was very like, really strongly focused on religion, that was the main aspect of life, probably everybody went to church, everybody had a religion and a faith and they would, they would go to battle for that faith whereas nowadays most people is like atheist.

To Erica, one of the defining differences between *Return of the King* or modern society with the Middle Ages is religious belief; she even misremembered *Beowulf* as being 'strongly focused on religion' in line with her conception that religion was a significant cultural element of the age. This shows the importance of religion to these participants' view of the Middle Ages: if something is considered medieval, religion must play a part.

## Crusade

Some participants enjoyed *Kingdom of Heaven* because it coincided with their understanding of crusade as a non-religious journey of self-discovery (as discussed previously, p. 165). Erica said,

I'd put like, a crusade is getting to know yourself [...] Orlando Bloom's character did do that because in the begin- he was like, God didn't love me, blah blah blah, and at the end of it he was fighting, not for God but it was fighting to like help people, 'n he still didn't realise, he still didn't like accept that god exists but he knew what he was here for.

Furthermore, Erica recognised the film's pacifistic message; to her, the film was a commentary on holy war 'That emm, that there wasn't really a need for it was just about defending the people in the end, it didn't matter what religion they were because they were defending an area of land that had a lot of different religious, em... like importance, it wasn't really about the religion in the end, it was the people,[...] religion was, like, pointless'. Robert saw the film as being devoid of religion as a true motive for the war: 'it came about 'cause of like selfish actions of the French and that's how they depicted it, the war wasn't really about religion 'cause uh, they were already there keeping the peace and everything, that Guy character became king and he was only motivated by his own self-glorification [...] religion became a side-issue, more about personal glory and pride'.

Some disagreed with this, and cited *Kingdom of Heaven* as a good crusade film on the basis that it depicted the Crusades as a war based on religion. Chloe reported enjoying the film because the 'basis of the crusade was religion [...] It was definitely not peaceful [...] They, they all go to fight for religion. It's, it's everything, all they, all they do [...] it was a big take on crusading which is based on religion'. Stephen felt that his knowledge of the Crusades was challenged by *Kingdom of Heaven*,

My idea of people who've been fighting for what they thought was a just cause, has actually been turned on its head because most of the people in the film they weren't particularly fighting for the religion. Um, the one overtly religious character in the film, the bishop was portrayed as a real coward and an opportunist.

Depictions of religion in these films differed largely from the expectations of the participants. None of these films depicted the expected norm of a hegemonic church which dominated the lives of everyday people. Additionally, none of these films cast the church in a complimentary light, and none of the participants felt that the morally virtuous characters were depicted as religious. Even the Crusades were revised to have a humanist cause, with religion unexpectedly placed as antagonist. Regardless of participants' varied ideas about medieval religion, the ways in which these films seemed to treat the subject largely conflicted with their knowledge. However, their reaction to this differed on a case-by-case basis.

### **Conclusion: What did participants learn?**

Some participants reported that over the course of the groups their opinions had been changed by the environment of the groups. The focus groups were not presented to the participants as being academically authoritative (except to the extent that they were conducted in a building on the University of Leeds campus by a PhD candidate). However, the simple act of watching films and discussing them with others led some participants to state they had learned from the experience. For example, Carin felt that seeing medieval films made her more inclined to see *Return of the King* as medieval. Chloe reported that increased exposure to medieval films made her more inclined to notice the medieval elsewhere: 'I think because I've watched two films quite like it [*Return of the King*] the previous two nights I think I'm probably more on a roll, more open to it, so I think I probably noticed things that I wouldn't have noticed before'. When asked what specifically she noticed, she said

I've got more of an insight into the battles and the kingdoms and again everything we've mentioned, I don't think, if I hadn't come to these sessions I probably wouldn't have thought about them. Now I know what I... I've learnt stuff from coming to this [...]. We've mentioned lots of things that we think are symbolic of Middle Ages and medi – medieval, and I wouldn't, I don't think I would really picked up and thought on them properly until now. And I don't know if I'll look at future things in the same light.

Justin also reported learning: 'maybe kind of the way I perceive medieval has changed over the course of the day, the few days [...] when I saw it I did I did largely see it as you know, maybe sort of settlements which were a bit more sprawling as in they were bigger, essentially, and that there was more agriculture everywhere. But I mean, I think now that I don't know it just seems like it, it's much more of a varied thing than I thought it was'.

Overall, though they reported learning different things, many of these participants reported learning, simply from the experience of watching films and discussing those films and their ideas. Ultimately, this (and the discussion above in this chapter) seems to imply that films can and do have an impact upon the public understanding of the Middle Ages, though the way in which they affect the understanding varies depending upon the individual, their previous experience, their personal interests, their knowledge and their interpretation of what they have seen. After viewing the films, participants often reported understandings of the Middle Ages which were strikingly similar to how they had been depicted in the films; sometimes they were self-aware that the films were the source of their interpretation, but often this process seemed to be unconscious.

## Chapter 8: Conclusions, limitations and looking forward

Qualitative research is known for eliciting surprising and provocative results; people often do not act in the way anticipated by even the most sophisticated hypothesis.<sup>391</sup> This study is no exception—much of what has come in the past three chapters surprised me. This last chapter reflects upon the results, and looks at their implications for academic disciplines most closely related to this thesis: medieval studies and education. Finally, it will look to see how the work done here could be expanded and applied to other fields and cognate topics.

### A reminder about limitations

Before beginning in earnest, it is important to recall the necessary limitations of this study. As described in chapter 3, qualitative research provides an in-depth view of a phenomenon and/or the perspectives of particular participants. Its intent is to deepen our understanding of events and human ideas and behaviours, rather than to enable broad conclusions or generalisation to a broader population.<sup>392</sup> Thus, it is recognised that the nineteen participants in this study held particular perspectives on the films they viewed and the questions they were asked. To determine whether similar views are exhibited by a larger population, additional studies would be necessary.

Another limitation is that the study was conducted by a sole researcher at a particular point in time. Much effort was made to collect and analyse data in a systematic and neutral manner. For example, I did not reveal to participants that I was a student of medieval studies, I worked to ask questions in a neutral manner, and I read and re-read every line of interview data and coded it using computer software. However, in spite of these precautions, bias in the results is always a risk.

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<sup>391</sup> Anselm L. Strauss and Juliet M. Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 2nd edn (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998).

<sup>392</sup> Strauss and Corbin, pp. 266-268.

## **Overall observations: The shape of knowledge of the Middle Ages**

Those approaching this study hoping to see participants with a detailed and sophisticated understanding of medieval history that matches the version of history produced by current academic historians will be disappointed. Most participants were insecure in their knowledge of the period. They frequently held temporal and geographical misconceptions, and were prone to anachronistic thinking.

By design, the participants of this study had not studied the Middle Ages beyond year nine at school (approximately age 13). They frequently looked back with scorn on the history they had been taught during their formal education. Yet, many of their ways of thinking about history is consistent with those taught under the English National Curriculum. The strict compartmentalisation of history into periods such as 'The Tudors', 'The Vikings and Saxons', 'The Middle Ages' or 'The Second World War' are examples. Additionally, their insular, parochial perspective, in which they frequently defined the period as English or British, and 'medieval' as being exclusive to English or British people, also seems likely to stem from emphases within the National Curriculum. At the same time, there was little in the way of a local, regional or personal identification with the period. No-one discussed the medieval features or history of their home town or region. No-one discussed the Middle Ages as personally relevant, and no-one seemed to identify the Middle Ages as a past inhabited by their own ancestors. In many ways, the Middle Ages were seen as a past, but not *their* past.

Notably, many participants felt they were living in a time that was superior to the Middle Ages. A model of inevitable and successful progress was reflected in their derision towards the period for its perceived barbarity, lack of scientific advancement, and popular adherence to outmoded religious practices. There was consistent focus on the period as bloody, disease ridden, poverty-stricken and backward, and that it was a time marked by oppressive rulership. As L.P.



Hartley famously wrote: 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there'.<sup>393</sup> To these participants, the Middle Ages is not just a foreign country, but a third-world one.

Coexisting with this negativity was a strong counter-image of the medieval world as a place of adventure, romance and idyllic fantasy. These two basic paradigms are fundamentally similar to historical cultural debates about the period; the Middle Ages were first defined as a backward time by Italian humanists and their Enlightenment forbears, but re-forged as an era of adventure, spirituality, light and beauty by the romantics and fantasists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>394</sup> However, to these participants, the darker, dirtier image of the age appeared more realistic. Medieval religion was never mentioned in a positive context; in many groups it was ignored, and where there were strong views they were negative (e.g. using derogatory terms such as 'papist').

### **The good news**

Conversely, those approaching this study expecting to see a populace entirely ignorant and undiscerning about medieval culture, caring little about history and believing everything they see, will also be disappointed (or, perhaps, encouraged). Although few participants could recall specific persons, events or dates, they revealed many surprising snippets of information. Strong viewpoints were taken during discussion, and there seemed to be a genuine interest and excitement about the period. Many recalled with delight a few instances of learning, usually from experiences at historical sites, or from learning with and from family members. Additionally, many were voracious consumers of medievalist popular culture, and much of their learning about the period seems to have originated there. Naturally, this may elicit nervousness amongst historians who rightly believe that popular culture often produces images of the period that are either skewed or entirely divorced from historical reality. But the silver lining is that, at least in this group of university students, there is clear interest in the period. Hence, popular culture is a natural

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<sup>393</sup> L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (New York: New York Review Books, 2002), p. 17.

<sup>394</sup> Ferguson, 1-28 (p. 28); Simmons, pp. 1-28.

inroad for education if historians can find positive ways of engaging with the film, TV or video-game industries. This is notoriously difficult, as scores of disenchanted historical advisors for TV and film have reported.<sup>395</sup> Often, the genre or even the medium of the piece encourages (or even demands) deviation from academic narrative; producers of popular culture break from the requirements of their medium at their economic peril.

Perhaps a more realistic goal would be for historians to engage directly with interested groups of fans. As a positive example, the popular computer game *Medieval Total War* (and its sequels) has spawned a community of amateur historian/programmers who released a number of overhauls of the game (called 'mods'), one of which was titled *Medieval: Total Realism*.<sup>396</sup> As part of the project, they modified core elements of the game that they felt did not fit with the historical record, and removed what they considered to be deviations from history made for the purposes of game balance or excitement. This illustrates the importance that some fans and players place on 'getting it right', since creating this mod took considerable effort by a community of 'modders' and was downloaded frequently. So, while deviations from history in popular culture are perhaps inevitable, historians can, and should, engage more fully with interested fans as mediators—not by decrying historical inaccuracy, but by proposing their own compelling versions of these stories.

### **Many Middle Ages(es)**

Another finding is the extent to which participants expressed multiple contradictory ideas of the Middle Ages with little apparent cognitive dissonance. These contradictory ideas were broadly distinguished by their definitions of the terms 'medieval' and 'Middle Ages'. 'Medieval' was related to the more idealised, optimistic, romantic image of the period. This included an idealised

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<sup>395</sup> Rosenstone, 1173-1185; Natalie Zemon Davis, "'Any Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead": Film and the Challenge of Authenticity', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 8 (1988), 269-283; Kathleen M. Coleman, 'The Pedant Goes to Hollywood: The Role of the Academic Consultant', in *Gladiator: Film and History*, ed. by Martin M. Winkler (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 45-52.

<sup>396</sup> 'Medieval: Total Realism Forums', *Totalwar.org* <<http://forums.totalwar.org/vb/forumdisplay.php?162-Medieval-Total-Realism>> [accessed 15 August 2010].

vision of the aristocracy, the characters, archetypes, icons, space and tropes of medieval legend, romance and adventure stories, and elements drawn from medievalist fantasy or fairy tales. The term 'Middle Ages', however, related to a historical dark period, which linked with the above idea that unpleasantness signifies historical accuracy. Though 'medieval' and 'Middle Ages' both included legendary persons (notably King Arthur and Robin Hood), it was only for the 'Middle Ages' that the historical figures of kings and queens were mentioned as well. In the Middle Ages, death and disease featured strongly, as did war, mud, poverty, repression and religion. The features of the period that were more alien to the participant, such as medieval religion, were more often seen as a feature of this aspect of the period. There seem to be a number of different 'Middle Ages', and therefore many 'medievalnesses'.

### **What part do films play?**

The films shown seemed to have a marked impact on participants' understanding of the period, but rarely in a predictable way. Participants' reactions to the realism of the film or its judged 'historical accuracy' were often not based on an overall impression of the film, but upon dissection, with many elements judged independently. However this does not mean that judgements of individual elements and overall impressions were not linked; an overall judgement that the film was poorly-made often had repercussions on their judgement of the rest of the film. For example, Jess felt that *Beowulf* was a bad film. As a result, she often judged it to be historically inaccurate seemingly based upon her dislike, rather than using her judgements about its historical accuracy to justify her dislike.

Similarly, participants often couched their negative reactions to a film in historical terms, even when their criticisms were not about explicitly history-related elements. For example, many criticised the accents in *Beowulf* or Orlando Bloom's effete manner in *Kingdom of Heaven*, though these were violations of the generic tropes of the historical film rather than deviations from history. It is possible that this was influenced by the focus group setting: since the topic was

*historical* film they may have felt that their criticisms should centre on history (though they often did not). However, it is also possible that close adherence to the generic tropes of the historical film genre lends a film credibility as a historical text, with deviations from genre being regarded as deviations from history. This may imply that some of the participants transferred their expectations of the tropes of media histories to their understanding of history in general: this requires further study. Do people really believe that medieval people spoke with Received Pronunciation English accents, and that historical heroes conformed to current standards of masculinity? Or are these expectations limited to the context of interpreting historical film?

Often, participants' previous knowledge of the period was a greater influence on their interpretation of the film than what they saw. Participants sometimes constructed false memories in line with their expectations, and were most excited about the parts of the films which fit with their knowledge. The excitement caused by seeing their historical knowledge confirmed was most vocally expressed when the film was perceived to violate 'Hollywood' conventions or generic expectations for the sake of history. There was a common perception that such generic formulations and conventions are a corrupting and debasing influence on film. Thus films seem to play a significant part in participants' learning, but mostly by reinforcing rather than revising ideas about the period in question.

## **Implications**

This study has implications for educators and for the academic disciplines of medieval studies and education.

### **Implications for Educators**

Does medieval film have an impact on the public understanding of the medieval past? For these participants, the answer is 'yes'. Many believed what they saw in the films, and occasionally showed evidence of learning from them (even though some of what they learned could be

categorised as misinformation). However, what occurred was complex. None of the participants believed everything that they saw. When learning was exhibited, it was almost always because what they were shown coincided with something that they already knew. As previously noted, they reacted most positively, and expressed the most pleasure when what they saw coincided with and gave more compelling nuances to their previous knowledge. Thus, the films' primary influence in this study was in *reinforcing* existing knowledge and providing new subtleties, rather than teaching new facts. Of course, this is not necessarily good, as films can further entrench the misinformation already existing within the public imagination. Neither is it necessarily problematic; participants rejected ideas in the films which, to them, were clearly anachronistic or ridiculous. Of course, the sophistication of this response was ultimately defined by the limits of the participants' understanding of the period; which as this study has shown is one of the most problematic factors to gauge.

Participants' learning from the films was also shaped by their group discussions. Each participant brought personal experience and knowledge to bear in interpreting the film, and ultimately many conclusions reached by the group were reached collectively by argument and counterargument. Here is credence for the constructivist model of the acquisition of knowledge; many of the conclusions about the films were reached over the course of the discussion rather than prior to it.<sup>397</sup> This indicates that learning by the viewers of historical film can be determined by the context in which a film is seen, whether individually, in a group of friends, in the classroom, at home, or in the theatre. An individual's peer group may accordingly have an impact upon the interpretation of a film and any related learning.

In addition, when questioned, many participants admitted that some of their sources of knowledge were not trustworthy. Also, many of their sources had been forgotten, and as a result could not be interrogated. Thus, the crucial step, where a person compares the authority of what they already know to that presented on screen, can become confused. If popular culture

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<sup>397</sup> Berger and Luckmann.

reinforces a forgotten-source idea, this has the potential of being accepted as 'common knowledge' or instinctual understandings. This can reinforce anachronism, myth, and stereotype. As Stephen and Justin discussed (p. 141, 211), once this knowledge is in place, it can become a 'gut reaction' that is difficult to shift even in the face of conflicting evidence or cognitive dissonance.

Historical film may therefore be part of a larger de/regenerative cycle of public knowledge, common understanding and 'gut reactions', which reinforces and provides new nuances to old ideas, rather than introducing significant new revisions. Much of the knowledge discussed in these focus groups was acquired during childhood, either in schooling or from popular culture. Many sources for this knowledge were misremembered or had been forgotten. Thus, memory (or more accurately, forgetting) is the bane of the educator, not only because people may forget what they have been taught, but because they may alternately forget the sources of their information. When this occurs, they cannot accurately compare the credibility of new information to their knowledge. This can lead to wildly inaccurate ideas, such as the misunderstanding that 'the Last Crusade' was an historical event rather than an Indiana Jones film.

### **Implications for Medieval Studies (or Medievalism Studies)**

As an academic discipline, the study of medievalism is still in its infancy. The approach taken by the majority of works in medievalism studies is highly abstract, often based in philosophy or critical theory (as discussed in chapter 2). Additionally, though studies of the reception of the Middle Ages have come into vogue in recent years, they largely have focused on its reception in the past (especially the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), or its reception by scholars, politicians and creators of culture.<sup>398</sup> While this is an important and valid strand of exploration, it requires a counterpoint that this thesis attempts to offer. This is the first study that focuses on the reception of the Middle Ages both in the present day, and by ordinary people. Medievalisms are

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<sup>398</sup> Recent noteworthy examples include: Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2002); Norman F. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages: The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 1992); Alexander, *Medievalism*; Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest*; Simmons, *Medievalism and the Quest for the 'Real' Middle Ages*.

pieces of culture, therefore medievalism studies are, fundamentally, cultural studies—whether of historical or contemporary cultures. The advantage of contemporary cultural studies is that the culture, and the people who produce it and consume it, are present to be studied. While historical cultural studies are required to be theoretical, contemporary ones can, and should, leave the ivory tower in order to pursue the understanding of medievalisms as they are consumed in the real world. By conducting this study, my goal is to begin to understand what the audience thinks, feels and appreciates when interacting with medievalisms.

One major conclusion is that these medievalisms may not be interpreted by the public in the manner proposed by theorists. For example, though much has been made of the political allegory of the story in *Kingdom of Heaven* (in this thesis and elsewhere),<sup>399</sup> participants in this study took little notice of this, either because they did not see it, or because they felt that the politics were a natural part of the story and beneath special mention.

Additionally, no two participants or groups reacted in the same way. Though many trends emerged in their interpretations, each participant was individual and unpredictable, relying upon their own unique perspective. Just as medievalism is a polyvocal cultural phenomenon, the reception of medievalism is highly individualised. Though there are some common interpretive patterns, individuals interpret medievalisms through their own personal perspectives, experiences, ideas and histories.

## Looking forward

This study begs to be expanded. For reasons already given, it was limited in scope. Its focus deserves to be broadened to a wider social cross-section with a more ambitious sample. Further avenues of exploration would be geared towards different age groups, particularly to see how

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<sup>399</sup> Simon Dalby, 'Warrior Geopolitics: Gladiator, Black Hawk Down and The Kingdom Of Heaven', *Political Geography*, 27 (2008), 439-455; Scott Alan Metzger, 'The Kingdom of Heaven: Teaching the Crusades', *Social Education*, 69 (2005), 256-262; Arthur Lindley, 'Once, Present and Future Kings: Kingdom of Heaven and the Multitemporality of Medieval Film', in *Race, Class, and Gender in 'Medieval' Cinema*, ed. by Lynn Tarte Ramey and Tison Pugh (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 15-30.

historically-based films for children impact upon what children learn about the Middle Ages. As discussed above, this initial learning is crucial, as it forms the foundation upon which the participants in this study are building. It would also be fruitful to examine people of different ethnic, cultural, and social backgrounds. This study was limited to British-identified people in higher education, who were likely to have had middle or upper- class upbringings. Hence, the results cannot be transferred to people of other backgrounds; the likelihood that Italians would feel different about medieval religion, or that Egyptians would feel differently about the Crusades is high. It might be that Americans, who consume much of the same media as the British and are in some ways culturally similar (a view reinforced by the scale of US funding for the making of the three movies), would likely have some similar responses. However, it is important to test this rather than assume it; many responses would likely be different; exploring similarities and differences in a transatlantic study should elicit valuable results. It would also be good to take account of different class or educational backgrounds, to shed light on how historical consciousness is informed by social context and region.

Film is only one of many popular-cultural influences on public historical awareness. Participants named a number of sources for their understandings, including novels, video games, TV shows, museum trips and more. With adaptation, the methods used in this study could be broadened to study how those who enjoy pop-culture medievalisms are affected by their interactions with other media. Additionally, this framework could be used to study interactions between culture and the public understanding of other periods. For example, the English media have a perennial love affair with Regency and Victorian narratives, whilst American media have seen a recent resurgence of the depiction of the Classical world, with special emphasis placed on depictions of sex and violence. Surely these, too, influence our historical consciousness, and merit study.

A programme involving these various permutations could comprise a life's work, or many; it is to be hoped that this approach will be taken up by others. The work is valuable because it



allows academics better to understand what people, whether incoming students or the public with whom they are increasingly encouraged to interact, think about the past, and why. As such academics can invent better ways to 'meet them on their own terms', rather than be condescending or overestimating. A related lesson awaits politicians responsible for education and curriculum content.

The results of sociological methods are doomed always to obsolescence, for as each new piece of imaginative medievalism is released, and as each generation is introduced to our collective imaginary Middle Ages, public understanding shifts. Each subsequent study will be a cultural snapshot: not of the present, but of a present culture which quickly becomes the past. That does not mean that such studies should be done less, but more, and more frequently. If many such snapshots are taken, they can give a better image of how and why cultural ideas of the Middle Ages change. Once assembled, a sort of 'moving image' emerges, an image of the public understanding of the Middle Ages evolving over time, always changing and being changed by the cultures in which it resides.

## Appendix 1: Sample moderator guide

Following the word-association exercise, these interview questions will be asked by the moderator.

**1) What does 'medieval' mean to you?**

- Can you group these words, which ones are similar?
- What can you call each group?
- How are they related?

**2) What does Middle Ages mean to you?**

- Are the two related? How?

**3) What does 'fantasy' mean to you?**

**4) What was the last medieval book, TV programme, or film you saw or read? [Alternatively, if they can't think of one immediately, ask them to name a few they know.]**

- (With reference to the previous answer) What made it medieval?
- Was there anything in it you thought was particularly medieval?
- Was there anything in it that was not particularly medieval?

**5) Where do you recall learning about the Middle-Ages?**

*Probes: If they are unresponsive, mention school, family trips, museums, books, films.*

**6) Do you feel that any of these questions could be worded better? Is there anything that we didn't cover that you think is important?**

## Appendix 2: Demographic questionnaire

Gender Male  Female

What year were you born? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your nationality? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you been educated exclusively in the UK? Yes  No

What are you studying at University? \_\_\_\_\_

Did you study History at GCSE or A-Level?

Yes

No

Have you ever taken a Medieval English Literature, Medieval History or Medieval Studies module at University?

Yes

No

How often do you typically go to the movies per month?

Never <input type="checkbox"/>	Rarely <input type="checkbox"/>	Once every two months <input type="checkbox"/>	Once a month <input type="checkbox"/>	More <input type="checkbox"/>
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How often do you watch movies on DVD or TV?

Never <input type="checkbox"/>	Rarely <input type="checkbox"/>	Once every two months <input type="checkbox"/>	Once a month <input type="checkbox"/>	More <input type="checkbox"/>
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Would you consider yourself a big fan of *The Lord of the Rings*?

Yes

No

Which of these movies have you seen?

A Knight's Tale	<input type="checkbox"/>
Beowulf	<input type="checkbox"/>
Braveheart	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dragonslayer	<input type="checkbox"/>
Eragon	<input type="checkbox"/>
Excalibur	<input type="checkbox"/>
Joan of Arc: The Messenger	<input type="checkbox"/>
King Arthur	<input type="checkbox"/>
Kingdom of Heaven	<input type="checkbox"/>
Monty Python and the Quest for the Holy Grail	<input type="checkbox"/>
Robin Hood (Disney)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Robin Hood: Men in Tights	<input type="checkbox"/>
Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves	<input type="checkbox"/>
The 13 <sup>th</sup> Warrior	<input type="checkbox"/>

The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian	<input type="checkbox"/>
The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe	<input type="checkbox"/>
The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring	<input type="checkbox"/>
The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King	<input type="checkbox"/>
The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers	<input type="checkbox"/>
The Sword in the Stone	<input type="checkbox"/>
Timeline	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Contact Details**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix 3: Informed consent form**

### **Focus group study for “Based on a True History?: Construction and audience reception of the 'Medieval' in contemporary mainstream cinema.”**

#### **RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

This research is being conducted to better understand public understanding of the past. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in three movie screenings, followed by an approximately one hour and thirty minute focus group after each one, wherein you will discuss with the other participants your thoughts on the films. These focus groups will be audio recorded.

#### **RISKS**

There are no foreseeable risks in participating in this research study.

#### **BENEFITS**

The benefits to you include the provision of food and beverages during the course of the interviews, and the opportunity to see these three films for free. Upon completion of all of three screenings and interviews, you will also receive two free passes to see a film at the Hyde Park Picture House.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The data in this study will be confidential. In the reporting of this research, all names of participants will be anonymised, and only the researcher will have access to the un-anonymous records. Any personal information provided to the researcher will be stored in encrypted files and will not be shared.

#### **PARTICIPATION**

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. At any point, including at the end of the research project, you have the right to retrospectively withdraw any consent given. You may also request that data (including recordings) based on your own participation be destroyed.

#### **REVIEW**

This research has been submitted to the University of Leeds Ethical Review Board and is pending approval. You may contact the University of Leeds Senior Research Ethics Administrator, Laura Sawiuk, at [redacted for thesis] if you have questions or concerns regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

**CONTACT**

This research is being conducted by Paul Sturtevant of the Institute for Medieval Studies at The University of Leeds. He may be reached at [redacted for thesis] for questions or to report a research-related problem. If you have any further queries or problems with this research, his supervisor is Professor Richard Morris, who is reachable at [redacted for thesis].

**CONSENT**

- Have you had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss the study? YES/NO
  
- If you have asked questions have you had satisfactory answers to your questions? YES/NO/NA
  
- Do you understand that you are free to end the experiment / withdraw from the research at any time, without giving a reason? YES/NO
  
- Do you understand that you are free to choose not to answer a question or perform a task without having to give a reason why? YES/NO
  
- Do you agree to take part in this study? YES/NO

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 Signature

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 Name in Block Letters

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 Date of Signature

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