



THE CINEMATIC  
DISCOURSE ON  
THE MIDDLE AGES

edited by  
Jarosław Wenta

in cooperation with  
Magdalena Kopczyńska



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SPATIA MEDIAEVALIA II  
(STUDIES IN THE PERCEPTION OF MEDIEVAL CULTURE)

THE CINEMATIC  
DISCOURSE ON  
THE MIDDLE AGES  
(IN CENTRAL EUROPE AND BEYOND)



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SPATIA MEDIAEVALIA II  
THE CINEMATIC DISCOURSE ON THE MIDDLE AGES

## FOREWORD

The second volume of the periodical *Spatia Mediaevalia* (Studies in the Perception of Medieval Culture) entitled *The Cinematic Discourse on the Middle Ages (in Central Europe and Beyond)* contains papers devoted to films on that period. One half of the films discussed is set in Central and Eastern Europe, whereas the broader contexts of the other half let us follow, usually politically-approved, scripts as another form of entities present in the cinematic art.

This adds a new dimension to an, originally local, collection of historical characters and props. Owing to the popular media that shape the social dimensions of the world of fiction, which has replaced the picture projected with critical theory, so dominant in the academic discourse, we have obtained source material enabling us to conduct research into the perception of the Middle Ages in film or on television in the said, politically-alienated, territory in the second half of the twentieth century.

Historically-motivated props and plots became a necessary condition to create relations which are inspired by art, subculture or the present political vision and which require broader social acceptance and justification. Limited with popular historical formulas, but at the same time free, imagination created the past, thus becoming a part of social perceptions stimulating collective and individual behaviour.

Owing to the main trends in the cinematic art and on television, the observed phenomena created opportunities which enabled infinite returns to historically or literally-motivated topics, various perceptions of the Middle Ages and other eras as well as a countless number of alternative stories.

For a historian, the social consequences of this phenomenon are unpredictable. It is more and more difficult to perceive a historical film as a documentary even though being a work of art remains one of its permanent attributes.

The volume begins with a triologue by a specialist in German and medieval studies, a historian who perceives history traditionally through its auxiliary sciences and archive studies and an expert in Polish studies who exceeds his

typical academic methods (SIEGRID SCHMIDT, WALDEMAR CHORAŻYCZEWSKI, and BOGDAN HOJDIS, respectively).

The Romanian historical film constitutes a pretext to seek a national myth (TEODORA ARTIMON) and the Japanese Middle Ages are discussed by a specialist in Japanese studies (ADAM BEDNARCZYK). Owing to the depiction of the early fourteenth century in the Polish feature film and television series, MARIUSZ GUZEK could discover its connections with political concepts in the Polish People's Republic. IWONA KOLASIŃSKA-PASTERCZYK contributed to our volume with the discussion of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1986), whereas SYLWIA KOŁOS with that of William SHAKESPEARE'S *Henry V*. We are also glad to publish another study by JAROSŁAW NIKODEM and the paper by MARTYNA OLSZOWSKA who analysed the knight figure in contemporary cinema.



## SPATIA MEDIAEVALIA II

THE CINEMATIC DISCOURSE ON THE MIDDLE AGES

SIEGRID SCHMIDT  
(SALZBURG)

# THE MIDDLE AGES IN FILM AND ON TELEVISION

More than ten films with a medieval story or motif could be seen within one week on Austrian and German television in October 2011. This demonstrates that films referring to the Middle Ages are popular not only with medievalists – an opinion confirmed by Umberto Eco who stated that: ‘It seems that people like the Middle Ages.’<sup>1</sup> In this chapter I will provide an overview of different types of medieval films. Although there are some methods to categorize these visual works on the basis of the country of origin, the literary material they refer to or the chronology of their release, it is impossible to introduce all films to the reader due to their vast number. Much research literature addresses the topic of ‘medieval film’ with some of it describing mainly the films presenting different literary topics produced over centuries and some relying solely on selected examples and discussing various kinds of filmmaking.

For the purpose of this chapter, I have chosen an intermediate approach. Firstly, I mention the most important academic approaches to the topic of ‘the Middle Ages and film.’ Secondly, I discuss some typical examples of different geographic areas – the English-speaking world, the French film tradition, the German medieval film, Egypt, and Eastern Europe, particularly Poland and Russia. I try to introduce the contents of the films in order to show some fundamental differences of their aesthetic, cultural, political and cultural frame and impact. In conclusion, I investigate the question whether,

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<sup>1</sup> Umberto Eco in Kevin J. HARTY (ed.), *The Reel Middle Ages: American, Western and Eastern European, Middle Eastern and Asian Films about Medieval Europe*, Jefferson N. C. 1999, p.3.



besides the differences, there are also common methods and trends of presenting medieval motifs in these films.

### RESEARCH ON MEDIEVAL FILMS

The work on 'medieval films' of scholars specializing in various humanistic disciplines started mainly in the 1970s as evidenced in the references quoted herein. Since that time attention has been devoted to creative cultural works dealing with medieval topics, referred to as 'medievalism' or *Mittelalter-Rezeption* in German-speaking countries. The first papers on this cinematic topic were delivered at conferences on medievalism in Berlin and Salzburg. The films discussed included Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen*, a work about the Arthurian world in the UK and the USA and about stories and heroes that seem very similar to medieval times and knights (*Star Wars*, *Knight Rider*). In the papers and essays delivered, a selected film was debated, described, and compared with the Old English and/ or the Middle High German texts and the historical facts referred to in that particular cinematic work. Questions about its production were asked occasionally. In his paper delivered in Berlin, Francis GENTRY discussed not only one cinematic work but also made an overview of medieval topics in a greater number of American and English films, discussed their context within the ideological frame of reference, and presented the development of Hollywood film in general.

Medievalism and the research thereto developed in the next decades, resulting in the publication of some essential works on films. Most of them were written and produced in the English-speaking world. One important task was to catalogue all of the titles of the numerous films with any connection to the Middle Ages. The most informative book in this respect is Kevin J. HARTY's *The Reel Middle Ages. American, Western and Eastern European, Middle Eastern and Asian Films about Medieval Europe*, published in 1999. HARTY provides basic information about 564 films: the title, the country and the year of production, the producing director and the film director, lead actors and actresses, the contents of the films and references to reviews and (academic) articles about the film. Although this may be the greatest existing collection of titles and descriptions, its structure is difficult to identify as pointed out by HARTY himself:

What follows is a record of nearly 600 films [...] that represent a hundred years of cinema, from the first of Geroges Méliès's several films about *Joan of Arc* in



1897 to Rob Cohen's *Dragonheart*, Sean McNamara's *Galgameth* and Gary Trousdale's animated *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* – all released in 1996. [...] I have defined the Middle Ages as running roughly from the early fifth to the late fifteenth centuries. [...] after 432, and films that recount events as late as John of Austria's defeat of Turkish forces at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. – I have excluded any film based directly on the plays of William Shakespeare [...]. Finally, I have defined the medieval only in terms of the Occident [...]. I do, however, include Chinese films that recount the journeys of Marco Polo and Arabic or Islamic films that are set during the Crusades.<sup>2</sup>

In the 'Introduction' HARTY presents a short overview of the development of medieval films, looking at their historical background or their iconic impact. He distinguishes pseudo-medieval and iconic films, such as *Conan the Barbarian* and the productions of Monty Python which seem to refer to the Middle Ages, at least on the surface.

Particular films are described and analyzed mostly in collective works in which the films on the same topic are discussed together. The essays are connected with those about medievalism or based on the literary or historical event the film recounts. Two examples from recent years include *Sessions at Kalamazoo* (the greatest international Medieval Congress held at Kalamazoo, Michigan) and *Mythen Bände* (Mittelalter Mythen-Band by Ulrich MÜLLER). A special topic was explored by Nickolas HAYDOCK and Edward L. RISDEN in *Hollywood in the Holy Land. Essays on Film Depictions of the Crusades and Christian-Muslim Clashes*.<sup>3</sup> The book was published in 2009 and the first two chapters focus on the topical and geographical frame. The chapters define 'medievalism' and 'orientalism' and describe the landscapes and other locations in medieval films. Interestingly enough, the text does not begin with a film focusing on the oriental crusades but on the eastern European ones: 'Northern Crusades through the East-European Eyes of Alexander Nevsky and the Nevsky Tradition',<sup>4</sup> followed by the expected chapters about *Richard I*, *Saladin*, *El Cid* and the *Chanson de Roland*.<sup>5</sup> The chapters discuss the films retelling parts of medieval stories and focus on the crusades with most films and chapters connecting historical and literary aspects of the Middle Ages and their modern creative and academic interpretation. As to the films from

<sup>2</sup> Kevin J. HARTY (ed.), *The Reel Middle Ages: American, Western and Eastern European, Middle Eastern and Asian Films about Medieval Europe*, Jefferson N. C. 1999, p.1.

<sup>3</sup> Nickolas HAYDOCK and Edward L. RISDEN (eds.), *Hollywood in the Holy Land. Essays on Film Depictions of the Crusades and Christian-Muslim Clashes*, Jefferson N.C. 2009.

<sup>4</sup> HAYDOCK 2009, 47–92.

<sup>5</sup> HAYDOCK 2009, 93ff.

the early cinema, such as *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924), up to the latest example of medieval oriental films, including *Aladdin* (1994) or *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), HAYDOCK mentions in his 'Introduction' that

[t]he Crusades have an embattled theater of operations for a mass-society intent on waging its wars of demagoguery over analogies between medieval and the contemporary 'clash of civilizations' [...]. With the attacks of 9/11 and what for many in the Bush and Blair administrations appeared the inevitable invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, analogies between medieval and modern interhemispheric (and inter-faith) wars have been thrust to the center of mass-mediated political discourse. This perceived new relevance of the Crusades caused analogies to be drawn and withdrawn, often within the same news cycle [...].<sup>6</sup>

A researcher into the crusades, historian Jonathan RILEY-SMITH points out that there is an important historical and political difference between the medieval crusades and the modern intercultural problems.<sup>7</sup> However, I think the modern issues are or can be discussed partly with films referring to historical topics; similar argumentation can be found in some papers. At least, all that happened between the Orient and the Occident in the last decade made these regions aware of each other.

Anke BERNAU and Bettina BILDHAUER published their book *Medieval Film* also in 2009 and adopted a completely different approach. The collected papers discuss various facets of cinematic aesthetics and theory<sup>8</sup> and how they work for medievalism.<sup>9</sup> They include aspects of film music, the medieval inspiration for films, the image of the Middle Ages evoked by films<sup>10</sup> and, last but not least, the political aspects of telling history, for instance, to justify actual political steps or to establish 'national allegories' as in *The Birth of a Nation*.<sup>11</sup>

In a German monographic work on films, edited by Christian KIENING and Heinrich ADOLF, KIENING explains the great interest in medieval topics:

<sup>6</sup> HAYDOCK 2009, I.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan RILEY-SMITH, *The Crusades: A History*, Yale 2005, pp. 299–309.

<sup>8</sup> Anke BERNAU and Bettina BILDHAUER (eds.), *Medieval Film*, Manchester 2009, pp. 20–59.

<sup>9</sup> Carol O'SULLIVAN, 'A Time of Translation: Language Difference and Cinematic Medievalism' in BERNAU and BILDHAUER 2009, pp. 60–85.

<sup>10</sup> Anke BERNAU, "Poison to the infant, but tonic to the man": Timing "The Birth of a Nation", Marcia LANDY, "The medieval imaginary in Italian films", Alison Tara WALKER "Towards a theory of medieval film music – Alison Tara Walker" in BERNAU and BILDHAUER 2009, pp. 110–57.

<sup>11</sup> BERNAU in BERNAU and BILDHAUER 2009, 86–109.

‘Das Mittelalter [...] evoziert die Idee einer Kindheitsphase der gegenwärtigen Zivilisation: Rau und agnostisch, patriarchalisch und abergläubisch, verkörpert es Züge, die auch aus der Gegenwart nicht völlig getilgt sind’ (‘The Middle Ages evoke the idea of childhood in the present civilization: rough, agnostic, patriarchal and superstitious, embodying signs that have not vanished totally until now’ (trans. mine)).<sup>12</sup> The films that meet these expectations present different images of the Middle Ages, stressing a historical frame which is either far in the distance or close to history in its ‘national, regional or local tradition.’<sup>13</sup> KIENING demonstrates these tendencies in Fritz Lang’s *Nibelungen* and Anthony Mann’s *El Cid*, pointing out that there exists a considerable difference between the American film and the European cinematic works. KIENING divides the film basically into two different forms: the great, monumental one, realized mainly in Hollywood, and the small ‘author-film’ that is mostly the European variety. He mentions the most important topics of medieval films and discusses various structures of telling stories in the visual medium. To demonstrate his theses, KIENING presents a survey of the films from 1917 (*Joan the Woman*) up to 2005 (*Kingdom of Heaven*). Additional articles in the second part of the work present different heroes and the films in which they are depicted: Heinrich ADOLF writes about Robin Hood films, Judith KLINGER about Joan of Arc and Christoph SCHNEIDER about Samurais. Obviously, the latter one is not a particularly European topic, but it adds a geographical dimension and exoticism to the temporal one. In the third part of the book special films are described and discussed: *Die Nibelungen* (1924), *Ivanhoe* (1952), *Das siebte Siegel* (1957), *El Cid* (1961), Andrei Tarkovski’s *Andrei Rublow* (1966), *Perceval le Gallois* (1978), and *La Passion Béatrice* (1987). This section concentrates on European films. The last part of the work includes a list of international and trans-European medieval films of the last 110 years and lists of names and titles of the works discussed. KIENING provides structurally the same information as HARTY (title, nation, year, directors, actors/ actresses, contents) but he mentions only about 200 titles.

Quite unsurprisingly, the latest genre of medieval film analyses are collected essays about the Middle Ages in popular culture, including an English and a German example. David W. MARSHALL published *Mass Mar-*

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<sup>12</sup> Christian KIENING and Heinrich ADOLF, *Mittelalter im Film*, Berlin/ New York 2006, p.11.

<sup>13</sup> KIENING 2006, 12.