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# Are Pigs Pink<sub>[w1]</sub>?

## Cinematic Perceptions of the Medieval Past

Francis Mickus<sup>1</sup>

### I. The Woes of the Technical Consultant

When discussing the tensions between fictional narrative and historical research, the problem is not so much the uncertainty in following events (that happens everywhere), but in the means used to convey a situation. The Devil is principally in the details. Film conveys information through the presentation of physical objects and actions; thus, for a historical film to function, not only sets and costumes have to look real, but manners and behavior have to convey the sense of a different time. Historians are comfortable with the latter but taken unawares by the former. As a result, when filmmakers turn to historians to gather information, they tend to irritate them by subsequently ignoring their advice. Even constructive and congenial exchanges tend to leave out aspects that are important for historians. This was the case in producing *Le Retour de Martin Guerre*.<sup>2</sup> Historian Nathalie Zemon-Davies, as a technical consultant, sent the filmmakers copious information. The resulting film remains a model for historic recreation, yet much of Zemon-Davies' input ~~however~~ was set aside.<sup>3</sup> These exclusions may have occurred for a variety of reasons which can say a great deal about the economics of film production, but also about the social, aesthetic and even historical attitudes towards the Middle Ages.

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<sup>2</sup> Written by Jean-Claude Carrière and directed by Daniel Vigne. Released in 1982.

<sup>3</sup> N. Zemon-Davies, "Movie or Monograph? A Historian/Filmmaker's Perspective," ~~in~~ *The Public Historian* Vol. 25 N°3 (Summer 2003): 45-48. The idea that film-makers have a propensity to play ~~"fast and loose"~~ 'fast and loose' with historical facts became the subject of Alan Alda's 1986 film *Sweet Liberty*, where a Revolutionary War historian (played by Alda) tries to overwrite the script to a film about his historical specialty.

The knowledge that a film-maker needs to convey physical reality is precisely the knowledge that eludes the consulted specialists that are consulted: how did people greet each other? When would a monk wear his hood or take it off? Historians do not really know the answers, as such mundane and repetitious information is weeded out from the sources they have at their disposal.<sup>4</sup> This may be why historians feel, as Marc Ferro argues, that only historical reconstructions are incapable of going beyond conveying the film-makers' ideology, but can give a vivid sense of what the past looked like.<sup>5</sup>

Michel Pastoureau made a similar observation when he expanded on his role as a technical consultant on two different occasions and the resulting use of the information he offered. With Eric Rohmer, while preparing *Perceval le Gallois* (1978), he discussed the use of color in the Middle Ages, but Rohmer and his set and costume designers discarded the information – indeed they followed a path that went counter to Pastoureau's suggestions, with, for example, a profuse use of violet, a color that would have been meaningless at the time.<sup>6</sup> But historians can make mistakes, as Pastoureau humorously recalls: while working with the team of consultants headed by Jacques le Goff on *The Name of the Rose* (1986), Pastoureau remembered at the last minute that medieval pigs were not pink, they were black. The designers did try to integrate the information by painting the pigs; the resulting footage showed a scene of unutterable squalor – which greatly pleased the film's director, Jean-

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<sup>4</sup> Moreover, this is information with which *historians* even do not always concern themselves.

<sup>5</sup> See the short interview posted by Gallimard for the 1994 reissue of Marc Ferro's Book *Cinema et Histoire/Cinema and History* (accessed October 31, 2020): [www.gallimard.fr/catalog/entretiens/01027953.htm](http://www.gallimard.fr/catalog/entretiens/01027953.htm).

<sup>6</sup> In his perceptive essay on the use of Medieval imagery in reconstructing the past, Corneliu Dragomirescu does not notice this shift in color. –While the article predates Pastoureau's specific reminiscence (see note 2, below), it does not predate his exploration of color and heraldry in the Middle Ages. –As a comparative study of Rohmer's film and Laurence Olivier's *Henry V* in their respective uses of Medieval manuscript imagery to convey a sense of the Medieval world, the startling differences in the use of color and lighting in the two films should have been a central concern. C. Dragomirescu, "Le Cinéma à l'épreuve des représentations médiévales : l'enluminure et le théâtre : *Perceval le Gallois* d'Eric Rohmer et *Henry V* de Laurence Olivier," *Babel*, N°15, 2007.

Jacques Annaud, as it played into the film's mysterious atmosphere, as well as a desire to depict the harsh conditions of the times.<sup>7</sup>

Annaud's response is the key to understanding filmic recreation: contemporary conceptions are the latest renditions of a tradition of interpretive reconstructions, a tradition that precedes the advent of film. The idea is not so much to show the reality of the Middle Ages as it is to give audiences a sense of *being there*. That conception of the past is firmly rooted in the nineteenth century's flowering of historical recreation based on objective discoveries in archaeology. As the first part of this paper will explore, there is a break with the classical ideal. It became important to accurately depict historical evolution (complete with its nationalistic intents). While the major arts moved away from historical recreation, the theater continued to do so, and, in England, Shakespeare became the primary historical conduit. Film eventually replaced the theater in this desire to recreate the past, but, as we will go on to demonstrate, film streamlines the process, creating generic codes to make a period in time and space recognizable.<sup>8</sup> *Realism*, we will see, thus becomes more a matter of expectations than of factual reconstruction: our expectations ~~on~~ of the Middle Ages reside in the period's very timelessness. Finally, as Shakespeare remains a conduit to our visions of the medieval past, we will study how the various versions of Henry's various interpretations of Henry V's character both question and exploit those filmic recreations. The sense of *being there* is a constant conversation between what we know of the past and the history of our interpretations of that past.

## II. The Break from Classicism and the Search for an Authentic Past

The nineteenth century witnessed a flowering of historical revival. Historians began presenting the history that favored each nation's past, transforming history into a carefully manipulated narrative that justified

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<sup>7</sup> See M. Pastoreau, *Les couleurs de nos souvenirs/The Colors of Memory*; (Paris: Seuil, Collection Points, 2010), 103-4.

<sup>8</sup> "Film can most directly render the look and feel of all sorts of historical particulars and situations." R. A. Rosentone, "History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, N°5 (Dec. 1988), 1173-85, 1179.

the present situation.<sup>9</sup>— Alongside the profusion of discoveries and rediscoveries about the Ancient World that occurred in the early century, from which the Ancient World, more localized archaeology also took place, such as the search for the site of Alesia in France. Archaeology and history both fed and grew from the desire to establish national identities that are not necessarily bound to Classical Antiquity. The recent film *The Dig* (Simon Stone, 2021) explores the political implications of the discovery of a Saxon ship at Sutton Hoo, in 1939.

England had felt an early sense of revolt when faced with the destruction of the Monasteries by Henry VIII, but for obvious political reasons could not save the great architectural achievements of the British Middle Ages. The Dissolution, in its very ruthlessness, shocked contemporaries into reexamining what was lost.<sup>10</sup>— It sparked the activities of various antiquarians collecting small, mobile artifacts, which would have a cumulative effect not so far removed from France's later determination to save its monuments. Victor Hugo's rallying cry, *Guerre aux démolisseurs/War on the Demolishers*, was a pamphlet an article published in 1830 1832 (the same year he published his classic *Notre Dame de Paris/The Hunchback of Notre Dame*), calling for a halt to the destruction of monuments for profit.—It eventually resulted in the creation of a governmental department dedicated to the cataloguing and preservation of historically significant structures and sites. France owes much of the safeguarding and restoration of its medieval sites and monuments to the pioneering inventory drawn up by Prosper Mérimée and to the research and reconstruction led by the architect and designer Eugène Viollet-le-Duc.

A curious consequence of this rediscovery of the past was that it offered people a profusion of historical visual styles to choose from, drowning out any innovations in design. French art historians coined the term *Eclecticism* to describe the visual style, or lack thereof, that permeated the mid-nineteenth century in France and beyond.—That eclectic taste,

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<sup>9</sup> G. A. Loud and M. Staub, Eds., *The Making of Medieval History*, eds. G. A. Loud and M. Staub (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, York Medieval Press, 2017). Two chapters in this book focus particularly on these problems: I. Wood, “Literary Composition and the Early Medieval Historian in the Nineteenth Century,” 37–53, and P. Geary, “European Ethnicities and European as an Ethnicity: Does Europe Have Too Much History?” 57–69.

<sup>10</sup> M. Aston, “English Ruins and English History: The Dissolution and the Sense of the Past,” in *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 36 (1973): 231–255, 256.

however, was accompanied by a desire to depict each of these styles in their original state as accurately as possible.<sup>11</sup>

While today we would see such artistic and historical attitudes as intensely Victorian, it was in fact an important break from prevalent attitudes towards history and its visual representation. Henry Fusseli, in painting a scene from *Henry V* for the Boydell Gallery project at the end of the eighteenth century, could place the setting and scene in a fanciful Classical style: it was meant as a History Painting, a scene of a past event recreated for its moral value. By the mid-century, such a composition would seem terribly out of place, as historical accuracy was a necessary component for historical representation. One could say that *History* painting gave way to *Historical* painting, with artists such as Jean-Léon Gérôme infusing a sense of historical reconstruction into an <sup>“academic”</sup> ~~academic~~ visual style. While these works maintained the sense of moral example in the subject matter, it was the historical representation that mattered, the sense of *being there*. Visual accuracy became an end in itself: it served to validate the intended meaning of the painting.

Baudelaire mocked Gérôme’s project by stating that he used erudition to hide a visible lack of imagination.<sup>12</sup> This assessment led artists to turn away from historical representation, paving the way ~~the way~~ for the Modernist schools, as epitomized by Manet and the Impressionists, with their modern subject matter and treatments and their more direct depiction of contemporary reality.

### III. Shakespeare and the Prehistory of Filmic Recreations of the Past

Imagery of the past was relegated to lesser media, such as engravings, book illustrations, or trading cards, where it would flourish. These images dominate our conception of the past, permeating our primary access to past events, such as school books, and distilling historical narrative in iconic scenes: the knight in shining armor defending a bridge, King

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<sup>11</sup> Either that or achieve a sense of synthesis of all the existing styles, as was the case for the Paris Opera by Charles Garnier.

<sup>12</sup> As noted in the Musée d’Orsay’s introductory web page to the 2010 Gérôme retrospective: “Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904): L’Histoire en spectacle” (accessed October 8, 2010): <https://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/agenda/expositions/jean-leon-gerome-1824-1904-lhistoire-en-spectacle>.

John's signing of the Magna Carta, or Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox. The *Astérix* series of comic books lampoons such images relentlessly, because they hold so pervasive a place in our collective conscience: as late as 1980, Steven Spielberg, in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, could plausibly show Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) referring to an image of ancient Israel from Gustave Doré's Illustrated Bible as an accurate depiction of an event.

The venue where visual historical accuracy was held at a premium was in the theater. One could argue that Shakespeare really took hold in of took root in English culture during the Victorian era. This was the era when editions of his plays were published for virtually every level of society, many augmented by illustrations by artists such as H.C. Selous or Sir John Gilbert.<sup>13</sup> In both cases, the illustrators offered images that didn't show actual theatrical representations, but sought more rather to recall the reality of the eras in which the plays were set. It was at this time that scholars, as well as editors, tried to establish the play's chronology. This started with Edmond Malone's edition of the plays in 1795-6, followed by James Boswell's 1821 edition, both established the plays in their conjectured order of composition, except for the Histories, which were presented in their historically chronological order. Charles Knight's edition, stretching from 1838 to 1843, followed the same pattern.<sup>14</sup>

This had (and continues to have) a number of implications for understanding Shakespeare's intent in writing the Histories, the most important of which being that nineteenth-century scholars tended to ignore the obvious fact that Shakespeare himself was writing about history, i.e., about a past that was different from his present day, and he went out of his way to underscore the fact. As Martha Driver and Syd Ray point out,

Shakespeare's plays, then, give us an early modern perspective on the medieval world, full of inaccuracies, anachronisms idealizations and demonizations that differentiate the two eras. The modern interpretation of the

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<sup>13</sup> Respectively the editions by Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke and Howard Staunton, both released in the early to mid-1860s, which gives give an idea of the competitive market for Shakespeare's plays.

<sup>14</sup> See S. Sillars, *Shakespeare and the Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford The University Press, 2013), 28-9.

medieval world, particularly Shakespeare's, had been highly influential and tenacious despite the efforts of medievalists to set the records straight.<sup>15</sup>

Shakespeare's texts, in short, "project the present onto the past, and they do so knowingly."<sup>16</sup> The rediscovery of Shakespeare was developed in conjunction with an increased exploration of the England's past. Antiquarianism expressed itself on the stage as a desire to visually recreate history, much as it was illustrated in books.—Actors for instance sought to dress in the costumes of the play's period.<sup>17</sup> —As historical knowledge progressed, it became increasingly apparent that Shakespeare, however, left out events that seemed of vital importance to mid-nineteenth-century producers. Plays were therefore augmented with silent ~~“tableaux”~~ 'tableaux' [or perhaps italics in this case?] to remedy such essential lacunae, a practice which continued throughout the century and beyond.—In 1859, Charles Kean interjected both a reenactment of the Battle of Agincourt and a monumental scene depicting Henry V's triumphant return to London from Agincourt. In 1899, Beerbohm-Tree inserted the signing of the Magna Carta in his production of *King John*.

Shakespeare, and not Scott or contemporary historians, served as the basis of historical authority.—“Audiences,” as Adrian Poole puts it, “were made to feel they were being educated.”<sup>18</sup> —This education is founded on a sense of History and its realization.—Poole notes how Mrs. Kean was cast as the Chorus in the 1859 production of *Henry V*, serving as a reference to Clio, the Muse of History, as these productions become “a serious contribution to ideas about history and Englishness that began to solidify in the 1850's and 1860's.”<sup>19</sup> —Shakespeare was bent to fit the historical ideals of the times.

#### **IV. Streamlined History: Falstaff, Film Genres, and Fairy Tales**

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<sup>15</sup> M. W. Driver & S. Ray, General introduction to M. Driver & S. Ray, eds. *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Performance and Adaptations of Shakespeare's Plays*, eds. M. Driver & S. Ray (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland & Co, 2009), 7-17, 10.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> S. Sillars, *Shakespeare and the Victorians*, 14.

<sup>18</sup> A. Poole, *Shakespeare and the Victorians* (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2004), 204.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*—Poole refers to a convincing argument made by Richard Schock.



It is often proposed that theater overextended its ability to recreate the realities of the past, and that film, with its unlimited visual abilities, took over. Rather than develop the Victorian desire to reenact historically important moments, however, in film a form not so far removed from the aesthetic of eclecticism set in:— Historical films, in general, and medieval films, in particular, chose to simplify their subjects by offering pre-established visual categorizations. Film thus inherited the practice of historical reconstruction, but the practice would eventually streamline into meta-filmic frameworks: *genres*.

A medieval film is a *genre* in the way a Western or film noir are genres, in the sense that they can be defined, as Bettina Bildhauer put it, as “a cluster or corpus of films that share certain features and raise certain expectations because, they are, to an extent, modelled on each other.”<sup>20</sup> To follow a genre is to borrow a number of visual and narrative codes, pre-established information about the story’s time and place.—By reducing a film to its specified genre, directors have a visual shorthand at their fingertips. The conventions of the genre allow for a meta-cinematic discussion of the themes the genre represents.—A Western-like *High Noon* (1951) relies on the audience’s expectations in a Western, as much the visual motif of the gun-fight as the thematic motif of community, to achieve its full impact.—With a genre, film-makers can enjoy a narrative concision that allows greater thematic focus.<sup>21</sup>

With such a short hand, however, film directors can be astonishingly casual about a film’s sets.—Hitchcock famously reduces the visual indicators of a place to its basic clichés and then uses those clichés to great effect, such as umbrellas and windmills in Holland for the 1940 film *Foreign Correspondent*.<sup>22</sup>—Set designer Richard Sylbert notes how it’s the set designer that creates the look of a film, as some directors have surprisingly little visual sense.—They do not establish a detailed description of the place where a film unfolds.<sup>23</sup> Genres preclude the need for realism;

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<sup>20</sup> B. Bildhauer, *Filming the Middle Ages* (London: Reaction Books, 2011), 12.

<sup>21</sup> To give an idea of the strength of such a discussion, Howard Hawks found the basic idea of a professional asking the townspeople for help in *High Noon* so unseemly that, in 1959, he produced *Rio Bravo* as a direct rebuttal.

<sup>22</sup> See *Hitchcock/Truffaut*, definitive edition, (Paris: Ramsay Poche Cinéma, 1983), 109.

<sup>23</sup> As quoted by I. Christie, “Changing Worlds: The Changing Role of the Production Designer,” in S. Allen & L. Hubner, eds: *Framing Film: Cinema and the Visual Arts*, eds. S. Allen & L. Hubner (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2012), 13-36. 31.

and rely more on recognition.-We do not know where *High Noon* takes place.-A town in one Western looks like a town in every Western, which is precisely the point: it is sufficient that it be the Old West.

While the West retains a sense of historical grounding, as it remains a vision of the post-Civil War western territories of the United States, the Medieval film loses even such grounding, creating a sense of prelapsarian timelessness. A medieval castle may be in England, France, Germany, or Spain.-Indeed, a church can stand in for a Castle, as was the case in Welles' *Chimes at Midnight* (1966), where a Spanish church was used to convey an English king's main hall.-Representing the medieval world is a desire to represent a Europe before the Europe we know.-Orson Welles expressed his intent to create an ode to ~~“Merry England”~~ ‘Merry England’ with *Chimes at Midnight* and so London, which in the fifteenth century was already becoming a bustling administrative and economic center, is curiously absent from his film.-But there is a tragic undercurrent in that ode.-The comedy which may have existed is lost in his conception of Falstaff, which, played thus, kills the joke:

Falstaff is a man defending a force – the old England – which is going down.-What is difficult about Falstaff is that he is great conception of a good man, the most completely good man, in all drama.<sup>24</sup>

This conception of Falstaff as the embodiment of Old England dovetails with G.K. Chesterton's analysis of Medieval England as a time of slow but relentless social progress, much of which would be lost with the modern world.<sup>25</sup> It is this world that Falstaff defends while educating Hal. The sense that the Middle Ages represent a lost Golden Age has been often expressed. Over at least the last two centuries, the Middle Ages, for good or ill, has almost invariably been presented as the opposite

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<sup>24</sup> Orson Welles, interview with Juan Cobos and Miguel Rubio for *Sight and Sound*, N° 35, (Autumn, 1966), pp. 158-61. Collected in ~~Bridget Gellert Lyons, Editor, *Chimes at Midnight*, ed. Bridget Gellert Lyons~~ (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers Films in Print Collection, 1988), 259-66, 261.

<sup>25</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *A Short History of England*, Chapter Eight, “The Meaning of Merry England” (London: Chatto and Windus, 1917. Reprint by Sevenoaks, Kent: Fisher Press, 1994).- It should be noted that Chesterton wrote his history at the height of the Great War: his history had to project the idea of an England worth fighting for.

of Modern Times.<sup>26</sup> –It would demand much of later historians to develop the idea that the *otherness* of the medieval is essentially neutral.<sup>27</sup>

Welles intended *Chimes* to be historically realistic, and was somewhat uncomfortable when, in their interview, Juan Cobos and Miguel Rubio pointed to the “rather stylized and unreal feeling about it.”<sup>28</sup> –Welles explains this as a problem of location shooting, but conversely understands that a film set must not seem perfectly real. Films must imbue sets with something more, and period pieces lose that aura.–The shoestring budget for *Chimes* forced Welles to focus his action on specific locations, but also helped to create a synthesis in the sets, illustrating the symbolic opposition between the two worlds Hal had to choose from: the world of the tavern, Falstaff’s world, made of wood, which is both changing and alive, and the world of the court, Henry IV’s, world, made of stone which is eternal and dead.–While the sense of the unreal is the sense of the tragedy inherent in the film, it also underscores the fact that looking at history is always an exercise of the remembrance of things past, which will always be selective and partial.–Do we regret that sense of loss or do we celebrate what has since been gained?<sup>29</sup> –Falstaff is crushed by Hal’s rejection, but also proud of seeing the great statesman his young protégé will become.–Which aspect does the audience see? The past is invariably a foil for the present.

Despite the realities of technical and social evolutions in medieval history, there is also a sense of timelessness that stems from the Middle Ages themselves.–The medieval world sought to fend off change, a source of instability, and, in the face of persistent invasion, plague and famine, a source of danger.<sup>30</sup> –Welles’ own disquiet in the face of change would find a perfect echo in a depiction of that world.–Falstaff’s is just one of the many sad stories of the death of kings.–They are eternally

<sup>26</sup> G. A. Loud and M. Staub, “Some Thoughts on the Making of the Middle Ages,” in *The Making of Medieval History*, 1-13. 9.

<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, Jacques Le Goff, *La Civilisation de l’Occident Médiéval/The Civilisation of the Medieval West* (Paris: Flammarion, Coll. Champs Histoires, 2008, reprinted from 1964).

<sup>28</sup> Cobos and Rubio, “Welles and Falstaff,” 259.

<sup>29</sup> W. Johnson, shortly after the film’s release, analyses this as a recurring theme throughout Welles’ œuvre, in “Orson Welles: of Time and Loss,” in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 21, N°1 (Autumn, 1967), 13-24.

<sup>30</sup> Le Goff, *L’Occident Médiéval*, chapter 1, “Structures spatiales et temporelles”.

applicable, fables for all times.<sup>31</sup> -Is it so surprising that fairy tales are often given a medieval flavor? Many tales are set in the symbolic space of the medieval world: Red Riding Hood lost in the forest; Sleeping Beauty locked in her castle. "Once upon a time" refers to that lost timelessness which is our memory of the Middle Ages.-This aspect of the medieval genre helps film-makers ignore the specific realities of the periods each film is set in, and accept a generalized sense of the Middle Ages.-All knights, for instance, be they from King Arthur's sixth century or King Henry's fifteenth century, wear (shining) plate armor. William F. Woods usefully sums up the generic nature of our vision of the Medieval and its practical application in films:

The Medieval world is filled with men on horseback, edged weapons, elegant queens and scruffy peasants, but because we can enter this world and dwell in it through the apparent reality of film, it is also a mirror for us: a shared experience dramatizing what we covertly hope and fear.<sup>32</sup>

In a recent conference, Andrew Elliott picked up on Wood's cue that audience expectation is central to what is expected as an accurate representation of past events.<sup>33</sup> The trap, of course, is that the demands of the genre become so overwhelming as to strip them of their use as narrative templates. For the medieval genre, the visual and narrative simplifications can lead the film to an unintended self-parody. John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981) looks unintentionally more like a Tolkienesque heroic fantasy, undermining its serious intent. The armors here are so shiny as to strain the film's credibility.-The genre, finally, is as easily parodied as taken seriously.-The comic treatment of the visual style, however, often tends to reinforce its thematic timelessness.-The

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<sup>31</sup> *Chimes At Midnight* is a good example of Bettina Bildhauer's sense of achronological history at work in medieval film, particularly in its relationship to time. See B. Bildhauer, *Filming the Middle Ages*, and A. Bernau & B. Bildhauer, "The A-chronology of Medieval Film," in A. Bernau and B. Bildhauer, eds. *Medieval Film*, eds. A. Bernau and B. Bildhauer (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2009), 1-19.

<sup>32</sup> W. F. Woods, *The Medieval Filmscape: Reflections of Fear and Desire in a Cinematic Mirror* (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland and Company, 2014), 1.

<sup>33</sup> A. Elliott, "Between the Screens of Medievalism," at the online conference *Medievalisms on the Screen: Representation of the Middle Ages in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Audiovisual Media* (April 29<sup>th</sup>-May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021), May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021, Central European University.

difference between *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1939) and its direct spoof, *The Court Jester* (1955), is one of tone, rather than intent.

## V. *Henry V*: Structuring the Medieval

The use of medieval images as a source of patriotism and valor continued well into the twentieth century, and, in 1944, Laurence Olivier would insert a twenty-minute sequence depicting the battle of Agincourt in his film production of *Henry V*. In many ways, Olivier's film production is the direct descendant of the Victorian stage productions like Charles Kean's.— One may even wonder to what extent Olivier's ideas are conscious recollections. In the film, the chorus announces the passage of the English fleet, which appears as a transition on the stage screen which becomes a cross-fade to a shot of the fleet.—William Macready used a similar device in his 1839 stage production of the play, using translucent draping to suggest a view of the fleet's crossing.<sup>34</sup>—Macready's production inaugurated the tradition of historically researched visual spectacle, one that reached its climax with the Kean 1859 production. These productions felt historically secure: the images of the time they portrayed were a factual reenactment of reality in their eyes.—Kean could stage his play as he saw fit.

Yet, if the past is used to justify national identity, representing the past is subjected to a variety of political, social, and aesthetic pressures, especially when faced with shooting a film like *Henry V* over the last, bleakest months of the Second World War. Olivier was initially uncomfortable with the film's objectives, which required such extensive historical realignment.<sup>35</sup>— By the 1930's, productions of Shakespeare's *Henry V* more closely explored the ambiguities of the original text. Olivier's own 1937 performance, under the direction of Tyrone Guthrie, presents a version of the play one reviewer considered a pacifist tract!<sup>36</sup> *Henry V* is a far more ambiguous play than tradition would lead audiences

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<sup>34</sup> Sillars, *Shakespeare and the Victorians*, 39.

<sup>35</sup> B. Eder, on The Criterion Collection website, explains how he initially tried to recruit another director for the project. "Henry V," [www.criterion.com/current/posts/49-henry-v](http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/49-henry-v) (accessed June 7, 2021, no page numbers).

<sup>36</sup> As noted by J. D. Mardock, "Stage and Screen" [https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/doc/H5\\_StageHistory/complete/](https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/doc/H5_StageHistory/complete/) (accessed June 7, 2021, no page numbers).

to believe.<sup>37</sup> Olivier knew that for the film cuts had to be made, some to streamline the play. Other more politically troublesome cuts were made at the behest of Churchill himself.<sup>38</sup> How many cuts could one make before falsifying the play's initial intent? Guthrie thought the film was vulgar, an opinion which Olivier laughed off, but implicitly understood, by saying only Guthrie could pronounce such a judgment.<sup>39</sup>

Olivier's production strikes a balance between the conflicting political and artistic imperatives, precisely by using the visual tradition which desired to recreate the past, and by asking which past was to be recreated? The film opens with a tracking shot of Elizabethan London; and the opening act of the play is set in a recreation of Shakespeare's Globe Theater. The film then shifts to a vision of the fifteenth-century France, then to a realistic depiction of the battle of Agincourt. The film then and thereafter recedes to the beginning in reverse order.<sup>40</sup> In so doing, Olivier calls attention to the tensions between history, its Shakespearean representation, and our own. It is not a sense of the reality of the past, but a history of its images, which Olivier animates in his film. Historical London is a print, and then the theater; the first medieval image is of Southampton. Many of the images of France are direct quotes from the illuminated manuscript *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, as it was known through the first modern edition with color lithographic reproductions.<sup>41</sup> Even the Battle of Agincourt sequence owes more to Hollywood productions such as the 1938 *Adventures of Robin Hood* than to any realistic reenactment of the battle. With Agincourt, for instance, we

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<sup>37</sup> Including, at times, well-informed audiences. C Barbier, in his analysis of *Henry V*, dismisses the play as blatant Tudor propaganda. One wonders if he had actually read the play or accepted Olivier's film as a faithful adaptation. "Prince Hal, Henry V and the Tudor Monarchy" in D.W. Jefferson, Ed., *The Morality of Art: Essays Presented to G. Wilson Knight by his Colleagues and Friends*, ed. D.W. Jefferson (London: Routledge Keegan Paul, 1969), 76-75.

<sup>38</sup> P. A. Cohen, *History and Popular Memory: The Power of Story in Moments of Crisis*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 187, sqsq.

<sup>39</sup> R. Shaughnessy, "Tyronne Guthrie," in John Russel Brown, ed., *The Routledge Companion to the Shakespeare Director*, ed. John Russel Brown (London and New York, Routledge, 2008), 123-139, 137-8.

<sup>40</sup> D. Krempel was the first to notice the layered quality of Olivier's visual design, going from the Elizabethan world, to the picture book Middle Ages, to the realism of Agincourt, and back again in reverse order. "Olivier's 'Henry V': Design in Motion Pictures," in *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 2, N°4, (Dec., 1950), 322-28.

<sup>41</sup> *Verve*, N°7 (Christmas, 1939) and N°10 (1943), with a text by Henri Malo.

can appreciate Olivier's strategic use of color to reinforce the sense of animated image rather than filmed action.-Welles dismissed the scene as people in costumes riding across a golf green,<sup>42</sup> but that is precisely the point:- green is the color of chance.<sup>43</sup>- The film's form undercuts the ostensible wartime propaganda that is presented in its content: we may watch the flag waving, but we are presented with an image.

Initially hailed by critics, such as Bosley Crowther and, more strikingly, James Agee, as a faithful adaptation of the play, the sense of travesty eventually began to make itself felt.-Gorman Beauchamp even analyzed those problems in their relationship to the content and therefore the meaning of the play. "Not the medium, then, but the message he wants to impart is primarily responsible for Olivier's travesty of Shakespeare."<sup>44</sup>

Imagery is not the basic problem, even if, just before that sentence, Beauchamp likened Olivier's project to Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*.<sup>45</sup> -Beauchamp attacks Olivier's misuse of Shakespeare, but he is not overly troubled by Olivier's rendition of the medieval era. In 1978, though, his article coincides with a reassessment of the validity of medieval representation in general. Are the Middle Ages so preposterously heroic and visually *bright*?

A few years later, in 1986, an intelligent director like Jean-Jacques Annaud would revitalize the genre by challenging and thus reinventing what an audience should expect a medieval world to look like. Annaud started by avoiding shining armor altogether, with a film set in a monastery.-The film is visually and thematically dark: one could say that Annaud invented the "scruffy peasants," as the sense of squalor is an important motif in the film, as exemplified by Pastoureau's painted pigs. The squalor is amplified by Benedictine monks' crushing exploitation of the people.-The monks are the basis for a very diversified vision of the religious, which is developed as a triangle with the Benedictines at the base, the Franciscans, who are the central characters in the story (played

<sup>42</sup> Cobos and Rubio, "Falstaff and Welles," 260.

<sup>43</sup> M. Pastoureau, *Vert, Histoire d'une Couleur/Green: The History of a Color*, (Paris: Folio, Collection Points Histoire, 2017), 128.

<sup>44</sup> G. Beauchamp, "Henry V: Movie, Myth, Play," *College Literature*, Vol. 5, N°3 (Fall, 1978), 228-238. 236.

<sup>45</sup> One wonders how often critics have actually seen the film: it is used simply as shorthand for *Nazi propaganda*.

by Sean Connery and Christian Slater), and the Dominicans, presented as austere, yet closed-minded priests (as portrayed by F. Murray Abraham).—The film itself finally is quite dark, using low key lighting, extensive night shooting, as well as dark colors for the sets and costumes.

Eco himself was a noted medievalist, and was impressed by Ellis Peters' brother Cadfael series.—*The Name of the Rose* was his response; with a certain puckish sense of humor, he named his hero William of Baskerville.—Both the novel and [the](#) subsequent film borrow the plot structures of a murder mystery.—Eco's novel is something of an answer to the question that arises from reading Cadfael: would the Medieval mind solve a mystery as the modern mind would?—The answer paradoxically appears to be yes, but not exactly in the same way.

Annaud's project was to represent a valid image of the Middle Ages. Not only was the original novel written by a medievalist; Annaud would build an entire team of major social and cultural historians as technical consultants, led by Jacques Le Goff. The credibility of his film came from his use of what was at the time the cutting edge of medieval history; and would spark a revival of the genre.

Through Annaud, Olivier's picture-book gives way to Branagh's more naturalistic approach nearly a half-century later. Like Annaud, Branagh's vision of the fifteenth [century](#) is darker.—This darkness is amplified by the absence of windows in the interior scenes, a claustrophobia that is reinforced by Branagh's insistent use of close-ups and tight group shots.—Even collective scenes focus on the people, almost negating the existence of the room or any surrounding space.—This strategy leads Branagh to satisfy one of Beauchamp's suggestions for [the](#) visual treatment of the play: “an extended reaction shot” to Henry's exhortation at the gates of Harfleur.<sup>46</sup>

Branagh's version of *Henry V* is as much (if not more) of a remake of Olivier's version as it is a retelling of Shakespeare's play.<sup>47</sup> —He cuts as many scenes and lines as Olivier does, but they are not the same cuts, yet he retains the focus on Olivier placed on Henry himself. Branagh's film

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<sup>46</sup> Beauchamp, “Movie Myth, Play,” [page](#) 232.

<sup>47</sup> In various interviews and texts, Branagh calls attention to the intended differences between the two films, carefully downplaying their formal relationships.— See his *Introduction* to the published screenplay of the film (New York, London: W. H. Norton and Co., 1989) or the short promotional film *A little Touch of Harry: The Making of Henry V*, 1989, Mary Gwatkin, Dir.



verges on the monochromatic, while Olivier's film is a dazzle of colors. Mud is as much a motif in Branagh's film as it is absent in Olivier's. The only visible blow in Olivier's Agincourt is when Henry knocks down the French Constable. Branagh's Agincourt is a constant series of thrusts and parries (set to the repetitive *whoosh* of arrows being shot), with a climatic insistence on the duke of York's death, complete with blood issuing from his mouth. Like Olivier, however, Branagh plays with the tension between film, history, and theater: he uses the theatrical device of recycling sets: the same red brick wall serves as a backdrop for all the palace scenes. Olivier's Chorus (Leslie Banks) is an Elizabethan stage manager, while Branagh's (Derek Jacobi) is a modern tour-guide. Olivier explores *Le Très Riches Heures*, while Branagh uses English manuscripts to dress Henry, such as the robe at the French court which is patterned from the portrait of Henry found in the British Library manuscript Arundel 38.

## VI. Henry and the Historians

The comparisons and contrasts between the two films can continue for a considerable time; indeed, many of the articles on Branagh's version explore its relationship with Olivier's film, as well as with Welles' contribution to the characterization of Henry of Monmouth. These three films are structurally identical and thus form something of a triad. They stand as the primary contribution to the contemporary exploration of his character. The two versions of *Henry V* essentially book-end a dry spell in the historical exploration of Henry V, and, to a lesser extent, of Lancastrian England. Olivier's version closes a rich period, dominated by James Wylie and William Waughn's two-volume *Reign of Henry V*, which was completed in 1929, but with other biographies appearing as well. Branagh's film appears a few years after G. L. Harriss reignites the study of Henry V with the collaborative *Henry V, the Practice of Kingship* in 1985.

The fact that both Olivier's and Branagh's films are technically adaptations of Shakespeare (which is in itself a mediation of historical representation) tends to obfuscate the fact that they are clearly self-conscious depictions of a medieval past. When taken into consideration by scholars, however, the medieval is dismissed, as décor, a peripheral aspect of the film-makers' intention. It is rarely taken into consideration in its own right (or if it is, it is done at the expense of Shakespeare). Even

Erwin Panofsky, who refers to Olivier's film in his essay, does not pause to consider how Olivier's film contributes to our vision of the past.<sup>48</sup>

In Olivier's case, most certainly, there is a persistent desire to anchor the film in an-historical iconography. The companion booklet on the making of *Henry V* is peppered with photographs of Olivier reprising classic poses, including the King in Majesty and, most interestingly, the profile portrait of Henry V from the National Portrait Gallery. Yet these images are rarely discussed, and, in that silence, they are dismissed as irrelevant to any historical discussion. Olivier's project in particular is radical: rather than offer a sense of what it would be like to live in the fifteenth century, he offered the audience an animated vision of how the fifteenth century saw itself. Branagh, on the other hand, due in part to the success of the recent production of *The Name of the Rose*, returns to the longer tradition of offering audiences a vision of what it would be like for us to live in the fifteenth century. Can either be considered a real vision of the past?<sup>49</sup> Images, like texts, are *special*: they are not so much an objective reflection, as they are a subjective selection of specific details that are meant to be recorded and commemorated. As such, an image is always a construct. We may think there is a spontaneity to snapshots on the beach, but even such commonplace records are subject to choice, organization, and editorialization.—Not only does the (usually anonymous) photographer choose what is to appear in the frame and how, but that image can be reshaped afterwards, by being cropped for the family album, for instance. When the content to be photographed or filmed is in turn manipulated to achieve a specific effect, the photograph becomes even more subjectively selective.

Images for historians are, at best, superfluous, when they are seen as instantly recognizable (anyone can snap a shot on their cellphone), at worst, useless, when they become inscrutable (what does a prehistoric

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<sup>48</sup> In all fairness, Panofsky's famous essay "Style and Medium in Motion Pictures," which, in its 1947 revision, refers to Olivier's *Henry V*, is not really concerned with the representations of the past in general or of the fifteenth century in particular.— Yet, considering his extensive knowledge of the art of the times, it is surprising that he had nothing to say about it.

<sup>49</sup> The question in the case is obscured somewhat by the relationship to Shakespeare and the problems related to the adaptation of the play, which itself is a problematic depiction of history.—A similar and more visible case can be made regarding *Richard III*, which is constantly being rebutted to no avail.—Josephine Tey's 1951 detective novel *The Daughter of Time* is probably the best response in its popular impact.

image mean?).-But, on the whole, they do not convey the complexities of the past: they cannot explain, they can only illustrate.—But, as Pastoureaux's blunder makes clear, we in fact see things according to mental visual preconceptions.—Even he took a pig for granted.—That error led Pastoureaux to subsequently study medieval bestiaries, and in the process he discovered that not only are pigs not pink, but they are neither drawn, nor classified according to categories that we would recognize: the medieval world literally did not *see* the world as we did.

Historians dismiss the idea that images can convey the realities of the past, subtly implying that their research and *verbal* interpretations can. Are historians not just as subjected to a contemporary perspective as artists are? Isn't the shifting perspective really not what's more interesting? Historians describe the past.—Artists — be they Shakespeare's plays or the films made from them — are what make us see it.

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