

**Robert Bartlett. *The Middle Ages and the Movies: Eight Key Films*. London: Reaktion Books, 2022. 277 p. eISBN: 9781789145533. Ebook: \$ 22.50**

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In the first two decades of the 21st century, the Middle Ages became ‘aesthetically fashionable’ in a quite peculiar way. This manifests in the rise of the Middle Ages as a sort of raw material for producing cultural consumption goods (merchandising, movies, television series, video games and boardgames); tourism (medieval fairs, re-enactment); fashion subcultures (medieval core, gothic); music (Bardcore and ‘medieval metal’ would be examples) and design (Middle Ages Modern). The huge popularity of television series inspired by the Middle Ages and disseminated by the technology of streaming platforms (Game of Thrones, Lord of the Rings, House of the Dragon) is a prominent example of the trend. It is perhaps not entirely accidental that such trends emerged in a time, our time, that people like Mark Fisher have described as fundamentally marked by a loss of the ability to imagine a future that is not simply *more of the present*. This is the time when ‘futuristic’ is only experienced as *retro*; when nostalgia, revivalism, pastiche, and remake have become the recurrent forms of aesthetic production, manifesting a felt lack of alternatives even in conceptualizing the present. Concomitantly, academic research about such a plethora of cultural artifacts has also become trendy and many books and articles attempting to explain, describe, analyze, and contextualize this phenomenon have been published.

Robert Bartlett’s *The Middle Ages and the Movies: Eight Key Films* is one of the recent additions to this body of work. It offers a swift-paced and clear reading experience, despite its two hundred and fifty-six pages of running text. It obviously addresses a general audience, and is written in such a way that it will be stimulating and informative for the newcomer as well as for the so-called ‘cinema buffs’ or ‘cinephiles’, but also for those who just like to think about the films they watch. Robert Bartlett is a well-known British historian working in the fields of medieval hagiography (mostly British) and medieval European culture. He is no stranger to the medium of film in roles other than that of viewer or spectator, since he has taken part in BBC documentaries such as *The Normans* (2010).

His latest book comprises a lengthy introduction, eight chapters, each devoted to a specific film, and a concluding epilogue colorfully titled “Wrapping up”. It is not encumbered by the typical scholarly apparatus of heavy footnotes and endnotes, but we are presented with a useful list of works for further reading, both for general purposes and for each of the films discussed. The book is also packed with useful insights and engaging reflections around the ‘case studies’ Bartlett selected to explore what the title of his book announces and is recast in the title of its Preface: “Medieval history on the screen”. It begins with a question that is *not* the question the book attempts to answer, for our knowledge of the answer to *that* question is what gives the book its *raison d'être*: “Where do we get our picture of the historical past?” The answer is right there in the question: we get it from *the pictures*. However, this is a recent historical development, one that goes back to the 1890s, as Bartlett points out, but also a development that came to special prominence since the late 1970s, with the advent of home video competing with cinema theaters and a more generalized access to films in that format. But before these relatively recent developments our ‘picture of the historical past’, as Bartlett points out, came from *reading*, and, in societies where transmission is oral, from *listening*.

Bartlett frames his analyses on this fundamental contrast between literature (especially the historical novel) and the moving image (including cinema and television) “as different ways of turning historical fact into historical fiction” but also on literature as a *source* of the cinematic image. This ‘commerce’ between fact and fiction within representation is, so to speak, the conceptual axis for Bartlett’s approach to his ‘case studies’, i.e. the films he selects: eight representative or ‘key’ films from the 20th century, from different decades and in retrograde order, from the 90s to the 20s, with two films from the 60s and no example from the 40s: *Braveheart*; *The Name of the Rose*; *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*; *Andrei Rublev*; *El Cid*; *The Seventh Seal*; *Alexander Nevsky*; and *Die Niebelungen I: Siegfried*.

One of the merits of Bartlett here lies in not giving any methodological weight to a distinction between ‘high brow’ films and ‘low brow’ movies: the Hollywood blockbuster, new and old, side by side with the revered names of the *film d’auteur*: Tarkovsky, Bergman, Eisenstein, and Lang, as well as the Monty Python parody. No matter how these films may differ in their artistic merits, people will lose sight of any real and useful distinctions if they are not discussed with equal seriousness (snobbery is a moral vice but it also hinders understanding). They all are sources of our shared ‘picture’ of the medieval past. But they are also more than that: their making has a point that transcends the mere portrayal of garments, gestures and setting of a past time. This raises the question of what makes the films selected ‘key’ films. Bartlett is a subtle reader and viewer who understands that an artwork is much more than its apparent subject matter: it is a device through which problems are raised and addressed, and human experience is put in perspective. So the eight movies seem to have been chosen because they exemplify not only different relationships between the moving image and the written word (stories drawn from actual history, from the literature of the past, or

modern fictions with an historical setting) but also because they address specific topics that are of peculiar interest in the context of the 20th century: topics such as the idealization of romantic (heterosexual) love; the nation-state and political ideology; war; religion. These topics are also helpful to frame another question that might come up: what is so special about the *Middle Ages* in cinema, when the bulk of historical films are devoted to the ancient or the early modern world. Something like an answer to this question could be glimpsed from another question: why are the Middle Ages so important to 19th century Romanticism and the myths of nationalism? Significantly, the book's chapters are accompanied by several frames from the films discussed. The first frame shows a scene of romantic love that historically could not have happened, and the last frame could be an illustration of Kracauer's concept of *mass ornament*.

The preface begins by raising the issue of the distinctive features of the cinematic medium relative to other media, particularly the written word. The crux of this distinction lies in the fact that films *show* things, while a text must *tell* them. This difference comes with both possibilities and limitations, each of which is responsible for the abovementioned distinctive features and thus for different ways of representing reality: both film and writing have a 'point of view', but in film this applies literally, as we must see what the camera 'sees'. So while in literature we must imaginatively fill in the 'blanks' inevitably left by a description or narration, in film we are always presented with definite appearances; whereas literature has no problem with the direct use of abstractions (e.g. 'feudalism'), film cannot show abstractions but only convey them by means of visual synecdoche or metonymy, playing with part-whole relationships and associated images. The same applies to the interiority of characters, which literature can handle just as it does abstraction, while film must resort to other means. There are problems shared by both media, such as how to present language and manners in a way that makes the past intelligible but is also credible. And there are problems uniquely related to film's being maximally subject to and dependent on technical changes and money. These questions will be taken up over and over again in the eight chapters but probably the two most significant examples given by the author of this discrepancy between written text and film are the love scene between Adso and the peasant girl from *The Name of the Rose*, and the depiction of the Battle of Stirling Bridge (without a bridge), in *Braveheart*, which ignores even the 15th century anti-English poem on which it seems to be based, but also the sexual relationship between Wallace and Isabella of France, which was historically impossible but could be the filmmakers' intentional or unintentional distortion of the fact that Edward I had a much younger wife.

In addressing the question of adaptation, the author observes how in many cases there is a more or less complex *chain* of adaptations: a medieval source is used by a modern theater play or historical novel and then these will be adapted to film. This question is important because it shows how the link between cinema and medieval sources (in both their fictional and factual aspects) can itself be mediated by a third link, which also becomes part of the story (an example he gives is Jarman's adaptation of Marlowe in *Edward II*, which he uses to contrast with how the prince is depicted in

Mel Gibson's film and to what specific political purpose). Most films about the Middle Ages follow this pattern and the eight films discussed in the book are no exception. Bartlett is amply generous in examples to illustrate his point of view on the several issues he addresses, and doesn't restrict himself to the films he analyzes in each chapter, using several others as counterpoint and a basis for comparisons. By referring to other films in these cases, he allows the reader to gain a wider perspective of how 20th century cinema has reconstructed (and reinvented) the Middle Ages. But his doing so also brings cohesion to the book as a whole, assuaging unavoidable doubts concerning the choice of this film instead of some other. For instance, a prominent absence throughout the book, namely, Dryer's film on Joan of Arc, is compensated in the 'epilogue' ('Wrapping Up'), where the author discusses films with that subject matter. Curiously enough, Bartlett seems to exclude films where women are somehow protagonists rather than mere subjects, which is curious precisely because absence of women is a feature he repeatedly points out and discusses in several of his 'key' examples.

Issues of anachronism and inaccuracy, which come up frequently (if not obsessively) in discussions about historical cinema as a whole, are treated by Bartlett as important but also rather complex and not as something criterial in the evaluation of historical films. In fact, Bartlett explicitly endorses the view that the (artistic) consequences of anachronisms and inaccuracies cannot be assessed or measured in the same way for all cases. The same kind of inaccuracy (e.g. with a date in a caption) has different value and consequences in different films. In some cases, inaccuracy has a negative artistic effect, in other cases such details will have a negligible importance. Sometimes because what matters is the *type* of event or situation being evoked; other times such inaccuracies are deliberately introduced for aesthetic or technical reasons. For instance, the heraldics used in the tournament scenes of Anthony Mann's *El Cid* belong to the 12th century, not to the 11th. However, Bartlett believes this is positively justified by the purpose of rendering those scenes more colorful and dramatic. Sometimes simplification is blamelessly required by the constraints of the cinematic medium, as exemplified in *Andrei Rublev*, with the story of the war between princes that leads to the treacherous alliance with the Tatars and the attack on Vladimir. Not only is actual history simplified to that of a conflict between two brothers but Tarkovsky has one of them represented as leading the raid in person rather than from afar, as would make sense.

It would take too much space to describe all the interesting and variegated cases of historical inaccuracies, deliberate or unintentional, explored by Bartlett. The crucial philosophical point concerns the nature of representation, and we identify here two aspects of which Bartlett seems to be well aware: i) that artistic representations are not only of particular things but also and especially of *types* of things and events; ii) that they *fictionalize* their subject even when this is a historical figure or event, in the sense that it can make it work as a symbol, similarly to how the terms of a metaphor become, within its frame, symbols of shared qualities that can be transferred imaginatively to

other things, thus enabling the thinking of new thoughts. This is why the balloon sequence that opens *Andrei Rublev* may stand for creative effort in a hostile world. As Bartlett suggests, but also for what we are trying to articulate right now: that to understand representations we need to do more than just identify what it literally shows, along with its inaccuracies; we need to ‘get off the ground’ and see the wider connections. This is what enables us to see that *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* mocks the British class system as well as some prevalent forms of ‘medievalism’ in the time; or that *Alexander Nevsky* is as much about the political atmosphere in Eisenstein’s present as it is about the medieval past. That the author shows a keen awareness of this is also why Bartlett’s book is infinitely more interesting than any historian’s list of complaints about the inaccuracies of films ‘based on true events’ could ever be.