**Authenticity or ‘simulacra’? The problematic process of creating a Medieval screen-work?**

**SLIDE 1**

Question:

Is it possible in a post -digital age to create an ‘authentic’ screen version of the medieval past which has not been distorted by contemporary or historical ideologies, gender bias or the process of adaptation?

Umberto Eco declared the ‘medieval period’ (500 to 1500 AD) as an historical ‘open text’. Arthur Lindley describes it as a ‘time before history’, a break’ between the sack of Rome and the Renascence, and as such a period that existed out with Jean Francois Lyotard’s, ‘grand narrative’, free of the dominating ideologies and cultural hierarchies of modernism.

Despite this, many scholars of ‘medieval film’, defined by **Richard Burt as a film or screenwork ‘set in the Middle Ages as well as films with contemporary settings that allude to the Middle Ages**’, argue that rather than reflecting this Medieval screen within mainstream culture, reinforce the dominant ideologies of modernism, such as democracy, monogamy and have been used to reflect the political, racial and gender stereotypes of the status quo rather than an authentic medieval experience.

SLIDE 2

**CLIP OF ‘UP THE CHASTITY BELT’ ( duration: ?)**

Authenticity as defined by the O.E.D. is:

“The fact or quality of being true or in accordance with fact; veracity; correctness. Also an accurate reflection of real life, verisimilitude”

In a post modern age, the ‘truth’ as a concept has become almost impossible to define, so if we define ‘authenticity’ in this instance, as an accurate reflection of real life or fact then we will quickly find the ‘medieval screenwork’, cannot even attempt towards authenticity, rather it reproduces what Jean Baudrillard termed ‘simulacrum’, meaning something copied from a source that had no original to begin with, but gives the appearance of the ‘real’.

SLIDE (DISNEYLAND) 3

In his 1981 seminal work, ‘Simulacra and Simulations’ Baudrillard uses the example of Disneyland as a simulation of America:

**‘Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulation. To begin with it is a play of illusions and phantasms: pirates, the frontier, future world, etc. …By an extraordinary coincidence (one that undoubtedly belongs to the peculiar enchantment of this universe), this deep-frozen infantile world happens to have been conceived and realized by a man who is himself now cryogenized; Walt Disney, who awaits his resurrection at minus 180 degrees centigrade.’**

Charles Jencks also points to the postmodern pastiche of ‘The Los Vegas Strip’, packed with simulation and simulacra, no better example is the medieval themed ‘Excalibur Hotel’,

SLIDE (HOTEL) 4

Images of Robin Hood and his Merry men jostle alongside King Arthurs Knights all resident in Windsor castle, and, where you can sleep in a drawbridge bed over a hand painted moat and watch TV hidden in a three dimensional tree trunk.

SLIDE (EXCALIBUR BEDROOM) 5

Simulation and simulacra are also evident in Medieval screen works spanning Cinema history, from Theodore Dreyer’s, Joan of Arc in 1923, to the ongoing and series ‘Games of Thrones’.

By adopting a post -modern deconstructive methodology it is possible to expose the simulation and simulacra and deconstruct the dominant hierarchies that have been projected upon this period of history with reference to screen works of *The Name of the Rose* (Annaud, 1986) *Les Visitors du Soir* (Carne, 1942) and *The Lion in Winter* (Harvey, 1968), *Up the Chastity Belt* (Kellet, 1972)

Natalie Zemon Davis argues, the effect of authenticity is most frequently ‘a matter of the period look’, period props” and period costumes and she posits that the medieval is ‘troubled by its lack of secure visual identity.’

SLIDE (the period look) 6

This was born out by the sample analysed. Miss en scene across these films varied from the clichéd, to the stylised (copied directly from Medieval art) to the outright anachronistic.

Sarah Salih, in her essay on ‘Cinematic authenticity effects’, notes that the medieval period is mainly meditated through the eighteenth and nineteenth century Gothick and Enlightenment fear of a pre- Reformation world, which constructs the period as the location of darkness, superstition, horror and dirt.

While Arthur Lindley argues that films set in the Middle ages are less concerned with historical accuracy than those set in other periods, and that they become analogies of our more recent past.

SLIDE (LES VISITEURS DU SOIR) 7

This was born out by Marcel Carne’s 1942 French film Les Visitors du Soir. The landscape of the film bears a closer relation to the iconic fairytale spires of Disneyland than of an ‘authentic’ medieval French castle and this extends to dialogue and costume which is a 1940’s style simulations of Medieval dress.

SLIDE (Slide Les Vis costume) 8

Although shot in Vichy France, during the second world war, the film set attempts to replicate the Castle at Carcassonne, itself a simulation created in the mid ninetieth century by architect Eugene Viollet-le-Duc.

SLIDE (carcassone) 9

Whilst, *Up the Chasitiy Belt*, as we have seen, owe’s more to the Carry on oeuvre which in turn is influence by the mise en scene of the music hall and the British panto.

SLIDE (Up the chastity belt poster) 10

The Name of the Rose, on the other hand, openly strived for authenticity in its depiction of the Medieval, even its striving towards accuracy as part of its publicity

“The reception of *The Name of the Rose* indicated that the film, at least on its initial release, succeeded in producing an effect of authenticity, and even acquired a reputation for devotion to historical accuracy’. (Sarah Salih)

SLIDE (name of the rose) 11

The director Jean Jaques Annaud’s took Eco’s lead in the novel in his obsessive attempt recreate the period, which included specially woven monks habits and removing crowns from the actors mouths but, did not extend to replicating the extreme dental decay which would have been common place among the medieval population in Sean Connery’s movie star teeth

SLIDE 12 (SEAN’S TEETH)

The stripped stone interiors of the Abbey, similarly, represent not the highly painted colourful interiors authentic to the period, rather, they reflect a post-modern perception of the Medieval informed by the protection of heritage and rising late 20th century trend for minimal and non - intrusive restoration.

In the same ways Medieval films often speak more about the cultural and political status quo of the times in which they were produced rather than the age in which they are set.

Revival of interest in the Medieval period has been historically connected with at times of great change. Breakthroughs in science in 1740’s sparked the Gothic Revival. The Pre – Raphaelite movement returned to the Medieval as a nostalgic escape from the polluted, fast moving man – made cities of the industrial revolution.

SLIDE 13 (Millais - Knight Errand)

Made during the second world war in 1942, Les Visteurs du Soir directed by Marcel Carne is set in France in 1485. The director’s choice of the medieval setting was partially to avoid difficulty with the strict censorship of the occupying German forces.

SLIDE 14 (les Vis - Troubdours)

The film’s plot involved a pair of travelling musicians (or Troubadbours) who have been sent by the devil to steal the hearts of a young couple about to be married in the castle. When the film was released in Paris its French audience saw it as an allegory for the German occupation and the Nazi’s attempt to steal the hearts of the French people.

The late 1960’s and early 1970’s, a time of great social and political upheaval also inspired a return in fiction to what was seen as a more Romantic period

SLIDE 15 (Lion in Winter)

Camelot, Beckett, The Lion in Winter, The Devil’s Crown and Up the Chastity Belt, where all produced in this period, a period when feminist activity was peaking and female empowerment became a patriarchal threat.

In all these films, made within mainstream narrative cinema, the female characters are posited as either background or supporting characters or if leading characters, politically and sexually problematic; Guinevere’s infidelity with Lancelot in Camelot; the merchant’s bawdy wife in Up the Chastity belt whose sex must be locked up to keep out intruders. In a ‘Lion in Winter’, Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine is depicted as a cuckold, powerless, vulnerable and incarcerated by her husband, despite her greater historical legacy as,“ a divine power that ended the age of patriarchy, but also in gaining the charters to merchants and craftsmen that led to the birth of the modern middle class’ (Markale: 2007).

Second wave feminists scholars of the late 60’s and early 70’s did much to challenge this patriarchal view of the Medieval. They began to ideologically excavate women’s buried histories, including, most significantly those of the Trobairitz, female musicians and poets.

SLIDE 16 (Troubairitz)

Like their male counterparts, the Troubadours, of which 250 are known, the Troubaritz performed for nobility at Court.Troubadour lyric predominantly explored, ‘L’Amour Courtois’, or ‘courtly love’, in poetry and verse (Aubrey: 86:1996), including accounts of Lesbian courtships between Trobairitz and Domna.

The onset of the Albigensian crusades in 1209, under the Pope Innocent 3rd, wiped out the Cathar religion and heralded the demise of the Troubadour and what they considered to be the sexually permissiveness society fostered by courtly love, burying Troubaritz in history for almost 600 years which is still largely unexplored within Medieval screenworks.

Question:

So in creating a Medieval screenplay in a practice based context how to reach towards ‘authenticity’? Go beyond the loaded perceptions of the medieval proliferated by modernity and re connect with not only its lost stories but with authentic experience of a Medieval characters, particularly women?

In her book, *Method meets Art,* Patricia Levy discuss the problem of practice based research and the ‘disjuncture between’ what she calls ‘my researcher identity and artist identity’ . The theory and the practice. For levy the two become compartmentalised . Levy settles on ABR (Arts based research) to create a more holistic relationship between ‘epistemology – theory – methods’.

Sarah Pink, In her article, ‘The Future of Sensory anthropology / anthropology of the Senses’, suggests an interdisciplinary methodology which also seeks to bridge the gap between academic and applied research. Pink states,

‘A sensory anthropology implies a ‘re-thought’ anthropology, informed by theories of sensory perception, rather than a sub-discipline exclusively or empirically about the senses.

Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale (2010) 18, 3 331–340.

Sensory ethnographer then, casts the researcher or artist in the role of a sensorial cipher, rather than sole an observational empiricist. The sensory ethnographer is tuned to the unspoken and non verbal or what screenwriters often refer to as the ‘sub - text’.

Sarah Pink gives the example of walking as a research method, something akin to Debord’s derive and psycho - geography. This she says is,

‘Informed by theories of knowing, movement and empathy, walking can be a multisensory everyday life practice that may be shared with others to enable researchers to understand their practices, perspectives, experiences and places.’

This then seemed a more direct way of generating sensorial data for the practice based past of the PHD - the writing of the Medieval screenplay, and may to some extent help by pass the already pre - existing and received view of the Medieval which I have outlined above.

SLIDE 17 (CATHAR WAY)

A walk was undertaken through a chosen section of the hidden footpaths and mountain trails and castles of the Cathar Way which is 250km route running through the foothills of the Pyrenees in the Languedoc region of southern France.

SLIDE 18 (MAP)

The route perambulated around Queribus, and Montsegur castles all associated with Cathars atrocities and Troubadour activity. The footpaths were also used to escape the Spanish inquisition during the thirteenth century.

SLIDE 19 (Montsegur)

An absence of primary source interviewees meant this became an auto - ethnographic inquiry using myself as a sensorial cipher to record the experiences of the journey through sight, sound and vision

SLIDE 20 (Trees)

By using film an audio recorded commentary (which covered smell and touch) this multi sensory experience was documented and material gleaned for the writing of the screenplay.

SLIDE 21 ( STONES)

Irwin and de Cosson call researchers who use these tenchiques (2004) A/r/t/tographers They search for new ways to understand realms of learning at the interface between their art making, research and teaching though attention to memory, identity, reflection, meditation, storytelling, interpretation and representation.

Mel Alexenberg suggests that this methodology is more suitable for researchers in a post digital age.

‘a qualitative research methodology congruent with an emerging paradigm shift beyond the digital culture of the information age to a post digital Conceptual Age that honours the ability to create aesthetic significance, to discern patterns, to craft meaningful narrative and to combine seemingly unrelated ideas into novel creation.

One method of auto - ethnographic inquiry he calls ‘learning through Aesthetic Creativity’. Devised by Alexenberg as a pedagogic tool involving ‘the materials, the concepts, the feelings, and the physical making of a thing’ He describes it as ‘charged with possibilities, with excitement and with involvement, its a little like making love.’ (Alexenberg 1981)

The challenge of creating an academic poster seemed a perfect opportunity to learn through ‘Aesthetic Creativity’. A decision was taken to create the poster by hand, rather than use software, to literally ‘walk in the shoes’ of medieval scribes, a form of sensory auto - ethnography, and to use the experience to ‘inhabit’ the medieval worldview.

SLIDE 22(Poster )

The poster would consist of a series of constructed ‘illuminated letters’, based on primary samples from manuscripts created between 1100 – 1400, and which depicted either Troubadour activity or scenes of courtly love. The original letters chosen as a template where created by scribes who copied artists stylised and embellished creations.

SLIDE 23 ( Letter and results)

Through practice certain consistencies revealed themselves. The lack of perspective, high colour, a fascination with textiles, and lack of individualism or psychological realism in the faces of those portrayed and above all the art was deferential, simple and decorative.

SLIDE 24 (TIME)

Creating the illuminated letters for the poster took time, each letter was a painstakingly created, the task lengthy and intricate. Using coloured inks and gold leaf meant mistakes where expensive and impossible to disguise. There was no option but to go slowly and carefully with the process.

SLIDE 25 ( TIME QUOTE)

This reflect Gurevich’s observation notes that medieval thinkers were more occupied with the present moment, ‘this model of the world is devoid of temporal depth and does not bear up the weight of the centuries which have passed since the moment of creation’

Once the letters were completed it was then necessary to scan them so they could be digitally ingested and positioned into Powerpoint. The bespoke illuminated letters were ingested into digital images which could be manipulated, altered and re positioned into the poster, thus something manmade and textural became a series of codified data, and as such one of Jean Baudrillard’s ‘Simulations’

However, although the end result ultimately removed the ‘authenticity’ of the bespoke material, which parallels the production of a Medieval screenwork, itself an anachronism, the process of aesthetic creativity did re - connect directly the to the rhythm and most significantly the perspective of the Medieval perceiver through practice.

Mel Alexenberg observes that,

‘Aritsts have always shaped their world view by their perspective inventions. Renascence artists renewed the greek logical perspective by visually representing three dimensional space from a single point of view and time as a cross section of a one way linear path . Most people in the industrialised world continue to see the world through the eyes of these renascence artists. Artists today in a post digital Conceptual age can once again re shape humanities worldview by inventing art of ecological perspective and integral consciences in a multi dimensional space -time continuum experienced today in the rhizomatic and interactive character of inernet 0.2

Thus, the re shaping of the post digital age creates space, or what Eco calls an ‘open text’ for the artist/ researcher to reconnect through practice with the ‘authentic’ medieval experience.

SLIDE 26 (NATURE)

As I sit down to create an original Medieval screenplay with the material gained from ethnographic sensorial research it will be interesting to see if being in a post digital age can actually aid me more fully to connect with an the authentic experience of the Medieval.

SLIDE 27 (WORKSTATION)

By stripping away the paradigms of modernism and re connecting with a more directly sensorial experience, the unchanging aspects of nature and the aesthetic process, the simulacrum attached to the medieval screen-work can not only be made transparent but hopefully bypassed in the creation of an original screenplay.