Based on a true history?: The impact of popular "Medieval Film" on the public understanding of the Middle Ages


Abstract

This thesis examines the understanding of the Middle Ages among the UK public and the impact that popular big-budget films which depict the period have on that understanding. Three films released between 2000 and 2009 are chosen for detailed study, their selection being determined by success at the UK box office as a measure of popularity: Lord of the Rings, Return of the King (Jackson, 2003), Kingdom of Heaven (Scott, 2005) and Beowulf (Zemeckis, 2007). Ten focus group interviews were conducted with nineteen participants, all between eighteen and twenty-six years of age, none of whom had studied the Middle Ages at GCSE level (age 14-16) or higher. In these groups, participants discussed their knowledge of the Middle Ages, were shown a film, and then discussed what they had seen. Participants were asked open-ended interview questions to encourage them to respond in their own terms and define what was important to them. As a result, topics ranged widely. In preliminary discussions, participants discussed how they understood the period, their academic, experiential and pop-culture sources of knowledge, their definitions of the similar terms 'medieval' and 'Middle Ages' and also their ideas about medieval culture, religion, warfare and crusade. After the films, participants discussed what they had seen usually in the context of what they already knew, sometimes constructing false memories of what they had seen which fit with their previous knowledge. Often they used the language of historical veracity to criticise the film for other related reasons (like poor filmmaking or inappropriate accents). They found support for many of their historical misconceptions in the films, but, rather than accepting all they saw as historical truth, they engaged in a complex critical discourse with what they were shown. The findings of this thesis have implications for medieval (and medievalism) studies, public history, and for the delivery of history in primary, secondary and higher education.

Item Type: Thesis (PhD)

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A recently formed academic organization devoted to studying how the Middle Ages is perceived today is The Society for the Public Understanding of the Middle Ages or PUMA. There’s also The Virtual Society for the Study of Popular Culture and the Middle Ages. I couldn’t say if the two entities are related. I’ve debated signing up for them but I doubt I have much beyond anecdotes to offer. 2 There have been efforts to correct factual missteps in popular media. Tim O’Neill, who

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