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Rebecca A. Umland and Samuel J. Umland: The Use of Arthurian Legend in Hollywood Film. From Connecticut Yankee to Fisher Kings

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Rebecca A. Umland and Samuel J. Umland: The Use of Arthurian Legend in Hollywood Film. From Connecticut Yankee to Fisher Kings
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The authors thesis is that the mythopoetic nature of the Arthurian legend particularly lends itself to Hollywood use because of „it's timeless appeal coupled to its adaptability“ (p.xi). They are not interested in a film's adherence to an identified authoritative literary source, or the historical accuracy of a legend which they recognise as ahistorical, but in how the filmmaker prioritises certain aspects of the legend over others in order to fulfil a specific, contemporary agenda. However, revelations about the lasting appeal of the Arthurian legend and the significance of certain films, have been overwhelmed by the wealth of plot detail they give.

Although they start with the literary antecedents, tracing the influences of medieval poets Malory and Wolfram von Eschenbach through Tennyson to T.H. White, they fail to summarise clearly the differences between each version of the legend, whether Lancelot's adultery with Guinevere or Arthur's incestuous liaison with Morgause took place, and what they signify. This would be irrelevant if the authors didn't repeatedly try to tease out the literary inspirations for the films' characters and plots, an aim they profess to be uninterested in. Unless you are very familiar with Arthurian and Grail legends the authors' points mean very little and hide their more interesting conclusions about the way Hollywood utilises them.

They discuss in depth the Arthurian Legend as Intertextual Collage, Melodrama, Propaganda, Epic and Postmodern quest.

Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) has been adapted five times since 1921 and forms its own self-referential subgenre. The films are usually up-dated to reflect the fashions, technologies and political and social sensibilities of the era in which they are made: expressions of nostalgia for the Pre-First World War period (1921 version), virtues of the American common man (1931) or PC sensibility (1995). The authors acknowledge these films are increasingly targeted at a teenage audience but fail to explain the significance of this long-standing trend to clean up Twain's original concept.

Films such as *Knights of the Round Table* (1954) and *First Knight* (1995) focus on the melodrama inherent in the love triangle between Arthur, Guinevere and Lancelot. The conflict between duty and desire and the general moral tone that the 50's films have, are particularly informed by a Victorian (Tennysonian) ethos. Whereas, *First Knight*, according to the authors, warns us of the age-old danger of „Momism“ (p.98), the distraction from the important by the domestic.

During the cold-war period Hollywood freely adapted the Arthurian mythos, in films like *The Black Knight* (1954), to reinforce the tenets of paranoia i.e. the enemy is within as well as without, and must be resisted by all means necessary. Although the authors agree that *The Sword in the Stone* (1963) is not *agiprop*, they place

this film in the propaganda section which seems to be a little arbitrary as the *Connecticut Yankee* cycle of films promote „mom and apple-pie“ as much as Disney.

Excalibur (1981) is singled out as the classic Arthurian film, and discussed in great detail in the contexts of Hollywood epic (in comparison with *The Ten Commandments*, 1956), as an adaptation of Mallory and as a John Boorman film.

The final section on postmodern variations could have been the most interesting if the authors had elucidated why the spiritual aspect of the grail quest has found favour with filmmakers and audiences today. George Lucas, in particular, incorporates many elements of the Arthurian legend in his incredibly successful *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* films. But what are the enduring qualities of the legend exactly? Unfortunately, the detailed plot descriptions, especially of *Knight Riders* (1981), often obscure the conclusions the authors do come to.

Rebecca and Samuel Umland have done a satisfactory job of showing how Hollywood has found a perennially popular vehicle through which to articulate its changing ideologies, and how the Arthurian legend has also benefited from this relationship.

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