



Transparent Walls: Stained Glass and Cinematic Medievalism

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Abstract

In its representation of stained-glass windows, medievalist cinema exploits the shared capacity of both media to articulate the dreams, visions and memories of both past and present. Many films avoid the detailed depiction of religious imagery, but in their fascination with the patterns of light and shade, and the oneiric aspects of stained-glass windows they tap into what medieval architects and writers saw as the capacity of glass to transfigure and transcend material reality.

Someone had indeed had the happy idea of giving me, to distract me on evenings when I seemed abnormally wretched, a magic lantern, which used to be set on top of my lamp while we waited for dinner-time to come; and, after the fashion of the master-builders and glass-painters of gothic days, it substituted for the opaqueness of my walls an impalpable iridescence, supernatural phenomena of many colours, in which legends were depicted as on a shifting and transitory window. (Marcel Proust)^[1]

In the "Overture" to *Remembrance of Things Past*, Marcel draws on the gothic past to describe the magic lantern, likening its effect to that of medieval stained glass.^[2] At the same time, he lifts the lantern's "impalpable iridescence" and "supernatural phenomena" out of any medieval religious context, emphasising the play and movement of coloured light, the lantern's capacity to depict "legends," and to transfigure the materiality of one's surroundings. Memory, here, is both personal and cultural, at once both technological and visionary.

Like other acts of medievalism, Marcel's description of the magic lantern helps us think about the way we use the medieval past in relation to any given present. More specifically, his invocation of the lantern's visionary medievalism suggests a rich pattern of associations between memory, the medieval past and the projection of lighted images. This essay explores these associations as they are played out in the medium of cinematic medievalism.

The analysis of film has been crucial to the development of medievalism studies, a field that analyses the broad patterns and desires through which we re-create the medieval, both as a set of practices, and as a cultural idea about the past and our own present. Some of the highest stakes of medievalism studies involve nothing less than the foundational structuring and identity of modernity, in Western (and potentially, Asian) culture. Modernity has a long history of defining itself in opposition to a medieval Other, a process that shows no sign of diminishing. Scholars of medievalism are also making important contributions to the history of sexuality; to the way we conceptualise temporalities and cultural change; and indeed, to global relations between the West and its others.^[3]

In the history of researching and writing about cinematic medievalism, early studies involved either a relatively simple form of character and plot analysis, especially in comparison with the bookish models or source texts for its narratives; or the critique of the historical accuracy of armour, costume, and architecture - the *mise-en-scène* of medieval film. The field has moved on, however, to a rather more sophisticated understanding of the medievalism of cinema, and cinema's role in the construction of what Nickolas Haydock calls "the medieval imaginary."^[4] The body of material is immense: Kevin Harty's *The Reel Middle Ages* (1999) takes the reader through over 900 films.^[5]

In particular, recent work has shown that medievalist cinema has the capacity to interrogate both the historical and ontological status of cinema itself. I take my cue here from Richard Burt's discussion of some of the analogies between medieval texts, especially early parchment rolls, and the opening title sequences and framing devices of cinema. Examining their "shared marginal parataxes, including historiated letters, prefaces, opening title sequences, film prologues and intertitles," Burt concludes:

My point is not that there are specific kinds of title sequences for medieval film; rather, all title sequences have something more or less medieval about them in that they combine images and texts, animate the letter. The more playful and creative the title sequence, the more animated and moveable the type, in other

words, the more medieval the sequence is.^[6]

Lifting the descriptor “medieval” out of its precise historical context in the Middle Ages, as Burt does, is not without its own difficulties, but as a challenge to normative temporalities, it allows us to think more freely about the experience of watching medievalist cinema, and the kinds of pasts these films project, imagine and remember. Burt’s use of analogy represents a provocation to conservative medieval scholars who insist on its impurity as a way of thought, in contrast to strictly historical ways of reading and thinking about medieval culture. Analogy can sometimes be a slippery critical mode, but I have found it a very useful starting-point in bringing together a diverse range of films, historical periods, and visual media.

The pre-history of cinema and its relation to medieval and medievalist art lies beyond the scope of this essay, which confines itself to the discussion of medieval and medievalist stained glass in various media, mostly film; and mostly in the representation of churches and cathedrals.^[7] It is nevertheless promiscuous, in historical terms, ranging speculatively over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries for its cinematic examples, while also meditating on some medieval discussions of stained glass and their later reception.^[8]

It is not surprising that directors and cinematographers are fascinated by the play of light through coloured glass, and the possibilities of film for exploring this beautiful medium of symbolism and narrative. There are more specific analogies, too, between communities worshipping in churches and movie audiences sitting in darkness, both gazing at illuminated worlds, both marvelling, like Marcel, at the transfiguration of material reality.^[9] But despite these analogies, we should note from the outset that medievalist film is usually more interested in the aesthetic possibilities of these windows, or the general symbolism of light entering a building, rather than matching the detailed scrutiny, panel by panel, of the complex conceptual designs of medieval stained glass windows. An obvious exception here would be screen documentaries that are freer to follow the customary narrative progression of church or cathedral windows from the lower to the higher panels; and to pause for close-ups, and explanations of their typological or commemorative images.

In many cinematic examples, stained-glass windows, like the high clerestory windows of gothic architecture, are a spectacular means of lighting scenes set in churches or cathedrals, where patterns of light and shade, or glass and stone, make for dramatic contrasts, even when filmed in black and white. The powerful symbolism of light entering a dark space, in the soaring arches, columns and vaulting of medieval buildings, is also a simple way of suggesting a moment of transcendence, as used, for example, in Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’s *A Canterbury Tale* (UK 1944), set in 1943, but deliberately presented as a modern revival of Chaucer’s fourteenth-century Canterbury pilgrimage. I will discuss this film in greater detail below, but observe here that if film and medieval stained glass share anything in the form of a structured gaze, that shared territory does not easily, or in any straightforward way, include images of Christ, the Virgin or the saints. Medievalist films regularly avoid the representation of Biblical or scriptural images. They tend to prefer the overall effect of light streaming into churches or halls; or to fill their windows with abstract, modernist designs, as in John Boorman’s *Excalibur* (USA 1981); or to replace Christian images in order to affirm an alternative symbolic universe, like the neo-Celtic interlinked circles in Warner Brothers’ animated *Magic Sword: Quest for Camelot* (USA 1988).

At the other end of the spectrum, an animated film such as Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* (USA 1991) capitalises confidently on the narrative capabilities of stained-glass windows to tell the film’s back story, in its prologue, through the panels of a stained-glass window set in one of the walls of the Beast’s castle. This offers quite a close parallel to secular medieval examples: neither medieval nor medievalist stained glass is exclusively religious, and can be the vehicle for quite elaborate narrative. In Chaucer’s early poem, *The Book of the Duchess*, the narrator dreams he is in a beautiful chamber, where the “yglased” windows tell the “story of Troye”, as well as the *Romance of the Rose*, the popular twelfth-century love allegory. Chaucer describes the effect of the sun shining through the windows, in a private, utterly secular bedroom setting:

*And through the glas the sonne shon
Upon my bed with bryghte bemes,
With many glade gilde stremes...*^[10]

Where *Beauty and the Beast* shows us the windows from outside, as the climax to a long shot through the forest, Chaucer brings us inside the walls, to show the coloured sunlight entering the room; and this is indeed the more common effect in cinema. This scene was emblematic for Longfellow, too, who described it in his sonnet “Chaucer”:

*An old man in a lodge within a park;
The chamber walls depicted all around
With portraitures of huntsman, hawk, and hound,
And the hurt deer. He listeneth to the lark,
Whose song comes with the sunshine through the dark
Of painted glass in leaden lattice bound;
He listeneth and he laugheth at the sound,
Then writeth in a book like any clerk.*

Longfellow links the birdsong with the vision of sunlight through coloured glass as the source and inspiration for Chaucer’s poetry. Like Proust’s opening invocation, this poem is intrigued by the capacity of coloured light to invoke a different temporality, and to inspire memory and narrative in the medieval poet.

Many medievalist movies are similarly concerned with the predominantly secular traditions of chivalric romance; and so the patterns shown in its windows are often simply decorative, like the windows of Guenevere's chamber in *First Knight* (USA 1995), or only minimally Christian, like the discreet crosses that adorn the windows of Arthur's round table chamber in the same film. In keeping with the resolute secularism of much modern medievalism, many films about chivalry seem even to equivocate about whether sacramental spaces (for weddings or other ceremonies) are even churches. *Camelot* (USA 1967), for example, shows Arthur and Guenevere being married in an indeterminate dark space, lit romantically by thousands of candles, as they walk towards a "priest" whose clothing and gestures bear little relation to medieval Christianity. This certainly seems in line with that movie's generally liberal, vaguely counter-culture, pacifist ethos.

Indeed, there is a strong tradition in contemporary medievalism that does not just ignore or displace Christianity, but which deliberately and overtly condemns, or even demonises it. Drawing on Reformation and Enlightenment critiques of the medieval church, modern writers and film-makers regularly depict medieval priests as ignorant, superstitious and greedy; and its inquisitors, popes and cardinals as weak, corrupt and cruel. Ingmar Bergman's *Seventh Seal* (Sweden 1957) is an early example, while Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose* (France, Italy, West Germany, 1986) may stand as the most influential modern instance, where different forms and institutions of medieval religion (Franciscans, Benedictines, the Inquisition, and the mystics) each demonstrate the frailties and divisions in medieval religion. Novels like Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* systematically shows the patriarchal practices and traditions of Christianity sending the more woman-centred pagan traditions of England into exile; while Dan Brown's *Angels and Demons* and *The Da Vinci Code* demonstrate that this conspiratorial reading of medieval Christianity continues to find popular acceptance. In this tradition, the medieval church is represented in a way that confirms one of the easiest fictions of modernity: that the Middle Ages is an era of dark superstition, characterised by a church that insisted on uncritical faith and was beset by rampant corruption. In such contexts, medieval figures like Sean Connery's William of Baskerville, or Derek Jacobi's TV detective-monk, Brother Cadfael, appear to prefigure modernity, able to rationalise faith, demystify medieval "miracles," and diagnose human psychological desires behind ostensibly religious disputes.

In an era of modernist suspicion about medieval religion, it is not surprising if filmmakers resist pausing too slowly or lovingly over religious stained-glass images, lest they seem to love, or idolise those images too much, or seem to be interpellating their audience as worshippers. Sometimes the best solution to such anxiety is technical, whereby expressive cinematography, animation or computer-generated imagery allow a director to produce a different kind of marvel to admire: a formal or aesthetic one, rather than an overtly spiritual one. Walt Disney's animated *Hunchback of Notre Dame* (USA 1996), for example, shows the gypsy Esmeralda praying to the Virgin, then wandering through the cathedral before coming to stand under the great rose window. Esmeralda is contrasted to the other worshippers, who ask for wealth or love. "I ask for God and his angels to bless me," they sing as they raise their hands before a full-length stained-glass window of Christ and the angels or apostles. Their self-serving prayers are contrasted with the gypsy's prayer for her people, "God bless the outcasts." At the end of her song, the sunlight comes through the illuminated rose window as a form of blessing, or answer; and is also picked up as an abstract pattern of soft light on the tiles of the floor, as Esmeralda stands in the centre of its multi-coloured spotlight, seemingly more in touch with the natural world than the citizens of Paris. Ironically, such spectacular effects can be achieved more reliably on film than in nature, given the vicissitudes of clouds and the seasons, in real cathedrals in real cities under real skies. The rose window makes another dramatic appearance in the film's dramatic and fiery climax, when Quasimodo rescues Esmeralda from the stake, and swings her up to a ledge in front of the window, where he proclaims "Sanctuary" three times. This scene, right down to Esmeralda's white petticoat, is borrowed from the 1939 *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, starring Charles Laughton, though its black and white medium focuses more on the cathedral's beautiful carving than its windows.

Similarly, in Luc Besson's *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* (France 1999), one of Jeanne's most dramatic visions takes place in a church where a stained-glass image of the angelic warrior St Michael seems to tremble in the "strange wind," and then explodes in a fiery, slow-motion riot of yellow, red, and orange glass fragments. The film holds back from the iconoclastic possibilities here, however, by showing the image seeming to re-assemble itself. *The Messenger's* infamous final scenes, in which Dustin Hoffman appears (in the manner of a medieval psychological allegory) as Jeanne's Conscience, demystify and psychologise Jeanne's experiences, "explaining" her religious visions as the expression of psychological desire. "You saw what you wanted to see," says Conscience, while Jeanne weakly appears to agree. Haydock comments:

Joan's Conscience mocks us along with her for being so easily led astray by time-lapse and slow-motion photography. It is as though we are being punished for our willingness to suspend our skepticism, for our sympathies with an age of faith. [\[11\]](#)

We ourselves "see" this vision of St Michael as a flashback: it is both a vision, and a memory, like Marcel's childhood memory of his magic lantern, suggesting that the translucence of stained glass makes it an appropriate vehicle for both processes: imagining or envisaging, and remembering.

Similarly, in Zucker's *First Knight*, we are shown a flashback to the traumatic scene from Lancelot's childhood that lies behind his social isolation and his psychological determination to excel: the boy's family is imprisoned in a church which is set alight. Lancelot's memory shows us agonised faces, glimpsed through stained glass and shrouded in smoke.

Such examples are a long way from the experience of seeing medieval stained glass. If I pause now to examine

some historical examples and contexts, I do so not in the spirit of “correcting” cinema’s use of medieval stained-glass; rather, to point out the diversity of medieval practices, and the complexity of debates about them.

The medieval use of stained glass flourished in the twelfth century, and remained a dramatic feature of Gothic architecture into the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, though mostly in its towering cathedrals and wealthy abbey churches, rather than smaller, parish churches. Both medieval and modern accounts of Gothic architecture stress that Gothic architecture used stained-glass windows, along with the upper galleries, side aisles, and arches, to produce an overall impression of light transfiguring the whole building, not just through the windows. Otto von Simson describes this stylistic development:

The stained-glass windows of the Gothic replace the brightly colored walls of Romanesque architecture; they are structurally and aesthetically not openings in the wall to admit light, but transparent walls. As Gothic verticalism seems to reverse the movement of gravity, so, by a similar aesthetic paradox, the stained-glass window seemingly denies the impenetrable nature of matter, receiving its visual existence from an energy that transcends it. Light, which is ordinarily concealed by matter, appears as the active principle; and matter is aesthetically real only insofar as it partakes of, and is defined by, the luminous quality of light [my emphasis].[\[12\]](#)

It was Abbot Suger (1081-1151) who was widely credited with developing one of the early exemplars of Gothic style, in his rebuilding of the Abbey Church of St Denis in Paris. Suger also wrote extensively about this project. In addition to this different use of light, Gothic architecture involved, in Rolf Toman’s words, “a new spatial order.”[\[13\]](#) Combining the pointed arch of Burgundian style with the rib vaults of Norman architecture, the supporting columns and flying buttresses of Gothic style permitted greater height, thinner walls, larger windows and more clerestories, and additional aisles and ambulatories, all allowing much greater passage of light through the building. Suger emphasised both the physical and the metaphysical aspects of light in his own writings. For example, when the enlargement of the upper choir at St Denis was complete, along with the addition of extra vaults, arches and columns, he added a six-line Latin inscription:

*“Once the new rear part is joined to the part in front,
The church shines with its middle part brightened.
For bright is that which is brightly coupled with the bright,
And bright is the noble edifice which is pervaded by the new light;
Which stands enlarged in our time,
I, who was Suger, being the leader while it was being accomplished.”*[\[14\]](#)

The Latin text for the third line here (*Claret enim claris quod clare concopulatur*) indicates the importance of the ideas of brightness and light, in what Erwin Panofsky describes as “the orgy of neo-Platonic light metaphysics to which Suger abandons himself in some of his poetry.”[\[15\]](#) Suger consistently emphasises the capacity of coloured glass, as well as the proliferation of precious stones in the Church’s ceremonial accoutrements, to lift the beholder from the material to the immaterial, to transcend the old and enter the new (the “new light”, in the inscription above), which is both theological (referring to the New Testament) and a sign of modernity. Suger wrote several accounts of the re-building project, and famously described the meditative state to which contemplation of the house of God leads him:

it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven; and that, by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner.[\[16\]](#)

This was not simply an architectural innovation. As Panofsky, Simson and others have argued, twelfth-century cathedral design seems to accord with developments in aesthetics, philosophy and theology, serving as a “model” of the medieval universe. “Above all ... the cathedral was the intimation of ineffable truth. The medieval cosmos was theologically transparent. The Creation appeared as the first of God’s self-revelations, the Incarnation of the Word as the second.”[\[17\]](#)

This is a different kind of analogical argument. In contrast to the ahistorical analogies between medieval culture and medievalist cinema, this is an analogy drawn from a synchronic comparison between architecture and world-view. It is exemplified by Panofsky’s *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, and is not itself without difficulty. It has been challenged by many critics who counter the idea of the cathedral as an expression of medieval scholasticism and who stress, in turn, either the economic and social contexts in which Gothic developed, or the importance of technical innovation.

This debate is a symptom of a larger issue that is of central concern to medieval scholars. When we are discussing the “medieval”, in discussions of medieval aesthetics, attitudes, or the appearance of medieval churches, it is important to recall that there is almost no such thing. It is an easy temptation - and this is one of the problematic failings of modernity - to abstract an idea of the medieval as an entirely stable, homogeneous cultural moment; whereas common sense will remind us that the “medieval” describes something like a thousand years of European history and a number of different regional cultures, and that its society was wildly diverse in levels of education and access to cultural capital. The cathedrals, and religious art generally, are no exception.

When we enter cathedrals, we walk through many different periods of construction and re-construction. The coloured glass in many of the windows was first installed in the twelfth century, when the taste was for deep, rich

colours, but later medieval glass, from the fourteenth- and fifteenth- centuries, was much lighter in colour, producing a very different effect. Additionally, many windows were re-designed by post-medieval restorers in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries; or by the deliberately medievalising aesthetics of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, designed and manufactured as part of a programmatic revival of medieval artisanal and aesthetic practices in the nineteenth century.^[18]

Moreover, although there is a common school of thought that says images of stained glass, like wall paintings and sculptures, functioned as educational or instructional texts for the unlearned, there is a rival view that argues that church art was designed to present more esoteric images, designed to aid the more specialised meditations of the monks of the cathedral.^[19] Suger himself described the elaborate, monumental typologies of his church as “understandable only to the literate.” And Michael Camille quotes St. Thomas Aquinas, who said that images in a church played the key role of stimulating the *memory* of the beholder. This is very different from the idea of stained glass as a text without words: the so-called Bible of the Poor.^[20] Michael Cothren offers a more modulated position:

... instead of offering a more widely accessible parallel to written scripture, stained-glass windows offered theological speculations, moral admonitions, contemporary extrapolations, and exemplary role models, frequently rooted in scriptural traditions. Sermon rather than scripture is the proper analogy for these pictorial texts.^[21]

I have emphasised the diversity of interpretations about medieval stained-glass windows in order to make the more general point which is fundamental to the study of modern medievalism: that the Middle Ages can never function in any straightforward way as the grounding text of medievalism, are not themselves beyond debate and discussion. In a recent study of the foundational importance of medieval culture to the work of the French avant-garde, Bruce Holsinger shows how Bourdieu developed his concept of the *habitus* from his critical work on Panofsky.^[22] This is just one of the weird temporalities of medieval and medievalism studies, and a reminder that traditional chronologies and cultural histories are rarely beyond all dispute.

Medieval stained-glass windows, then, did not always exemplify a perfect, closed system, equally legible to all medieval people. A fifteenth-century text, written as a kind of supplement to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, shows how such transmission was far from straightforward. The anonymous *Canterbury Interlude* (so titled by its editor, John Bowers), shows Chaucer's pilgrims arriving in Canterbury and entertaining themselves. The Pardoner, the Miller and “other lewde sotes” (*other ignorant fools*) find themselves in the Cathedral, peering intently at the stained-glass windows, “counterfeting gentilmen, the armes for to blase” (*imitating gentlemen, to describe and identify the coats of arms*) and arguing about the images and narratives depicted therein, until the Host chastises them for their ignorance, rhyming “glased” with “amased” to make the point.^[23] This poet shows the difficulties of reading the images of Gothic stained glass, and the telling difference made by class and education. The mention of the coats of arms also reminds us that medieval stained glass often carried images or signs of its patrons: it was by no means a purely scriptural or theological medium, but rather, as Benedict Anderson argues, performed important cultural work of affirming the complex articulation of Biblical with medieval time, and the communion of European citizens with sacred history.^[24]

As we saw above, cinematic representations of stained glass are often used as vehicles for visions and memories: sometimes they also, or instead, signal a kind of liminal temporal space, a transition between present and past: permeable light filters separating the multiple temporalities through which modernity regards, and engages with the medieval.

Brian Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale* is a much-discussed movie in medievalist theory, for its playful exploitation of anachronism in music (80s rock), ideology (entrepreneurial individualism that can transcend the constraints of class), and costume (wildly eclectic); its confused feminism; and its original reading of Geoffrey Chaucer as a compulsive gambler. I want to examine a scene that is typical of the de-sacralisation of medieval religious imagery, but which also shows how medievalist cinema uses the transmission of light through glass to suggest the movement between different temporalities; between the medieval and the modern.

In this scene, William (Heath Ledger) and Jocelyn (Shannyn Sossamon) meet in the cathedral. The first, and longest part of this scene is filmed in wide shot, as the camera tracks from left to right at a fixed distance from a series of tall luminous, stained-glass windows. These windows frame the action, but do not impose any specific religious imagery that might detract from the sexual tension between the two lovers, who face each other, but move forwards and backward, towards and away from each other as they argue.^[25] It is a very atmospheric scene, as the light slants in from the windows, and as clouds of incense merge with the streams of white and blue-grey light, contrasting with the warmer yellow light of the candelabra. The camera keeps its distance, and never shows a close-up of the images in the window. And indeed, the dialogue affirms that they are of interest principally for their colourful beauty.

William: You favour cathedrals.

Jocelyn: I come for confession. And the glass. A riot of colour in a dreary grey world. Don't you think?

William: It's beautiful. *He is looking only at Jocelyn.*

In this scene, Jocelyn tests William, saying that if he truly loves her, he will deliberately lose his next joust. Here,

she is at her most medieval, most like the Queen Guenevere of Chrétien de Troyes' twelfth-century French romance, *Lancelot: le chevalier de la charette*, who similarly tests Lancelot's love by asking him to lose at a tournament. But Helgeland also teases the viewer, deferring the exchange of close-ups and the conventional framing of male and female beauty we would normally expect in such an intimate scene until the very end.

In this scene, stained glass appears in its religious setting, but in a way that is entirely aestheticised. Weirdly, the windows even seem to prefigure the modernity to which Jocelyn aspires. She is herself both medieval, in her testing of William, but also "modern" in her sexual freedom, and her (limited) proto-feminism. Even though she is herself of noble birth, she is positioned as sympathetic to the "new world" of the film, in which the Thatcher's son, William, becomes a knight: first by pretending to be one; and second, by being recognised as displaying knightly virtues by none other than the Prince of Wales. Jocelyn's own wardrobe throughout the film is itself "a riot of colour in a dreary grey world." If her clothes signify the medieval, it is not in any historicist terms, but rather as what is exotic, and other: a version of medievalist fashion, both old and new.

A different, more thematic kind of relationship between the medieval and the cinematic, figured as the modern, is played out in Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *A Canterbury Tale*. Set in Kent in 1943, it features Eric Portman as Thomas Colpeper, an amateur historian desperate to make the past matter to the present, but unable to interest anyone in local history, or the presence of the past in the local landscape. The film takes as its structuring narrative the idea of Chaucer's pilgrimage to Canterbury Cathedral. The film opens, indeed, with Chaucer's pilgrims laughing and talking on horseback as they ride along the pilgrims' road (one of the major characters, Alison, later "hears" those voices and the bells on the horses' bridles). This opening also features the famous sequence in which Chaucer's squire releases a falcon into the clouds, where it transforms into a spitfire, as the hinge moment from the medieval to the modern *mise-en-scène*. The film regularly uses the idea of cinema as a sign of the modern, too. The English soldier, Peter Gibbs (Dennis Price), is a classically-trained organist, but now plays "just" in the cinema. The inversion of cultural values and landmarks is also played out in this ironic exchange between Colpeper and the American sergeant:

Colpeper: Pity. When you get home and people ask what you've seen in England and you say "Well I saw a movie in Salisbury. And I made a pilgrimage to Canterbury and I saw another one."

Johnson (laughing): You've got me all wrong. I know that in Canterbury I have to look out for a cathedral.

Colpeper: Yes, do look out for it. It's just behind the movie theatre. You can't miss it.

In the closing sequences of the film, each of the three visitors to Canterbury receives a kind of blessing. The sequence in the Cathedral shows light pouring into the nave through the great stained-glass window, as Sergeant Price fulfils his dream of playing a great cathedral organ. These scenes are entirely secular, though. The music is Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor (though he later plays the accompaniment to the hymn, "Onward Christian Soldiers"); and in keeping with most cinematic representations of stained glass, it is the play of light and shade, and their transcendent possibilities, rather than images of Christ, the saints, or biblical images that matter here.

Ironies abound. In 1943 when this film was set, the windows of Canterbury cathedral were boarded up against the damage of bombing raids. *A Canterbury Tale* even makes a feature of the bombing: Alison walks along a street unrecognisable after the blitz, though a woman points out that you get a much better view of the cathedral now. But a darkened, boarded-up cathedral provides limited access to transcendence, and so the long shots of the nave and windows were actually shot in a studio.^[26] A film that celebrates place, and the conjunction of medieval and modern, is possible only through reconstructing that place somewhere else. The ironies and temporal paradoxes came full circle in September 2007, when this film was shown in Canterbury Cathedral, as a fund-raising effort, to restore the lead roof, the stonemasonry, and the stained-glass windows.^[27]

Sometimes stained glass makes its point most eloquently through its absence. Of a similar vintage is *Mrs Miniver* (USA 1942) whose famous last scene shows the village community gathering in the bombed church, singing the same hymn that concludes *A Canterbury Tale*. The parish priest preaches about the war they must all fight now, as daylight streams in through the hole in the roof, and as the English countryside, for which they are fighting, is framed by the Gothic arch behind him, whose glass has all been shattered. Even when the glass is no longer visible, its absence stands powerfully for English tradition. This is the new world, but one that is literally framed by its medieval traditions.^[28]

Conversely, the vibrant colours of stained glass can be present in medievalist film without their architectural, symbolic or narrative framing. Vincent Ward's *The Navigator: A Medieval Odyssey* (New Zealand, Australia 1988), tells the story of a group of Cumbrian copper miners from the middle of the fourteenth century travelling through the centre of the earth to emerge in modern-day Auckland to fulfil a quest: to place a cross on top of the cathedral to ward off the plague from their village. Ward's film is deeply interested in technologies, and in demarcating the past and the present, while also bringing them together through an oneiric dialogue between past and present. The young boy Griffin has a vision of their quest, which guides the travellers; but sometimes the vision fades, and he cannot remember the future accurately enough to guide their actions. The past, the "reality" of the film, is shot in black-and-white: the "dream", or vision that brings the miners into the present, as their future, is shot in colour. Ward writes:

I was reminded too of Chartres Cathedral, whose extraordinary stained glass windows had suggested the colours I wanted for the film. The medieval glaziers, with an eye to lining their pockets, had demanded

crushed rubies and the blood of a virgin to achieve the pure, crimson red. But the formula for the rare blue of the Madonna's robe was a secret guarded so zealously that it has been lost forever. If I could recreate the colour of the windows then The Navigator would have the look of a medieval vision.^[29]

Elsewhere he says in interview, "To constantly remind the viewer that this is a medieval vision of the 20th century, the 20th century had to be portrayed in medieval colours,"^[30] and cites as examples the colours of Chartres cathedral, or the Limbourg brothers in the Duc de Berry's *Book of Hours*. Here is a kind of second-order authenticity, using a medieval colour palette, with all the exoticism of crushed rubies and virgin's blood to portray modern objects such as "road-side telephone boxes, police car lights and the moonlit grey-blue apparition of a nuclear submarine," in an attempt to give modern film viewers the experience of seeing the present through medieval eyes.

Perhaps the most radical conjunction of cinema, medievalism and stained glass appears in the work of Stan Brakhage. Several of his short, silent works, hand-painted directly onto the film, seem deliberately to invoke comparisons with the painted glass of medieval windows. *Untitled (for Marilyn)* (1994) intersperses the rapid sequences of brightly coloured frames - patterned splashes of paint, sometimes scratched and etched in the manner of stained-glass windows - with more naturalist shots of windows, both domestic square ones, and gothic arched ones. The effect is a kind of radical disarticulation of all the things this essay has been concerned with: colour, light, movement, architecture, moving forwards and backwards between the medieval and the modern. Occasionally, frames of hand-written text appear too: the last being "Praise Be/to God." *Black Ice* uses a similar technique.

Around this time, Brakhage also went to Chartres Cathedral, at the suggestion of filmmaker Nick Dorsky.

I, who had studied picture books of its great stained-glass windows, sculpture and architecture for years, having also read Henry Adams' great book three times, willingly complied and had an experience of several hours (in the discreet company of French filmmaker Jean-Michele Bouhours) which surely transformed my aesthetics more than any other single experience. Then Marilyn's sister died; and I, who could not attend the funeral, sat down alone and began painting on film one day, this death in mind ... Chartres in mind. Eight months later the painting was completed on four little films which comprise a suite in homage to Chartres and dedicated to Wendy Jull.^[31]

The Chartres sequence is not included on the DVD of Brakhage's films that I have been able to view, but four strips of film are presented on Fred Camper's [website](#). This is itself ironic, since Camper is a film purist who prefers not to discuss or review films he has seen only on video or DVD (although he did write the commentary that accompanies this compilation).^[32] It is an attitude that finds an analogy, perhaps, in those medieval scholars who refuse to take medievalism seriously, regarding it merely as secondary and derivative, the product of popular culture that can tell us little about the "real" middle ages. Since I am bound to neither mode of purity, I felt no compunction in observing these strips, trying to see if they could tell me anything about the relation between cinema and medievalist stained glass.

Initially, however, I misread these four long vertical sequences. They appear side by side on the website, and at first glance I thought they were four long windows in a cathedral, instead of being four sequences of film strip. Closer inspection shows the perforations in the margins, and the abstract designs and patterns in each frame. This mistake in my perception certainly tells us something about how our desires produce our visions (like Jeanne, we see what we want to see); but also something about the heavily mediated ways in which we customarily view both film *and* stained glass.

Richard Burt remarks that digital media is affecting the way we view the historicity of film, blurring the distinctions between different technological stages in the history of cinema as we view them on DVDs, for example.^[33] We may make the same point about images of stained glass in medieval churches, images that are often viewed in books, on film or television screens, in photographs, on computer screens, or even on plastic transfers or decals we can affix to our windows, to get a touch of the medieval "real".

My mistaken perception of Brakhage's film strips might well be explained as a function of my limited experience in working with film. It might be a sign of everything that is problematic about interdisciplinary work in medievalism studies: that it is too tolerant of loose, or flattening comparisons and analogies between different historical periods, different media, and different academic disciplines. On the other hand, it is only by exploring these possibilities that we can make those periods, those media, and those disciplines talk to each other, to explore the myriad ways we make sense of the past and the present. Medieval stained glass, and medievalist, cinematic stained glass both have a powerful capacity to articulate dynamic, changing relationships between the present and the past.

Endnotes

^[1] Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (1954; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), 9.

^[2] Grateful acknowledgement is made here to the many people who offered advice and suggestions as this essay

was being written, especially the readers of the [humanities researcher](#) blog who emailed me or posted comments in May and June 2009, drawing my attention to some of the films discussed in this essay, and helping me clarify some of the issues at stake: Delia Falconer, Grace Moore; and those who blog as Jeffrey Cohen, Jonathan Hsy, Janice, Eileen Joy, LanglandinSydney, Kvond, Karl Steel, Andrew Stephenson, Lucy Tartan and Vellum. Special thanks to Carolyn Dinshaw, Tom Goodmann and Fiona Trigg for reading an earlier draft, and for their various suggestions and corrections.

[3] Two powerful examples are Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, pre- and postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); and Bruce Holsinger, *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2007).

[4] Nickolas Haydock, *Movie Medievalism: the Imaginary Middle Ages* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), 5-35. For recent work, see, amongst others, *The Medieval Hero on Screen*, ed. Martha Driver and Sid Ray (Jefferson, NC: McFarland 2004); *Race, Class and Gender in "Medieval" Cinema*, ed. Lynn T. Ramey and Tison Pugh (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and the special issue of *Exemplaria* devoted to medievalist film, vol. 19 no. 2 (2007).

[5] Kevin Harty, *The Reel Middle Ages: American, Western and Eastern European, Middle Eastern, and Asian Films about Medieval Europe* (Jefferson: McFarland, 1999).

[6] Richard Burt, "Getting schmedieval: of manuscript and film prologues, paratexts and parodies," *Exemplaria* 19.2 (2007): 217-42, at 220 and 223.

[7] A more comprehensive study would include Philippe de Louthembourg's *Eidophusikon* (1781), for example, which projected light through rotating chips of stained glass. Conversely, other medieval visual media like wall-painting and sculpture would also repay further study for their relation to the cinematic tradition.

[8] I am conscious of Nickolas Haydock's advisory against studying medievalist movies in isolation from other films from the same director, or from other cinematic traditions, in *Movie Medievalism*, 83. I hope nevertheless that my extremely selective account of fragments might suggest some broader patterns and lines of inquiry for future study.

[9] Gerard Loughlin writes, "Like church, cinema creates social bonds through the projection of other forms of life that exceed the mundane, through the production of visions or dreams that can be sustained only through their repeated attendance." Extract from Loughlin's *Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology*, in *The Religion and Film Reader*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), 337-42. For a discussion of medievalist tourism in modern churches and cathedrals, see Stephanie Trigg, "Walking through cathedrals: medieval tourism and the authenticity of place," *New Medieval Literatures* 7 (2005): 9-33.

[10] Larry D. Benson, gen. ed. *The Riverside Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 334, lines 336-8.

[11] Haydock, *Movie Medievalism*, 124.

[12] Otto von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral: Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order*, Bollingen Series 48 (1956; revised edition New York: Pantheon Books, 1962), 3-4.

[13] Rolf Toman, "Introduction," *The Art of Gothic: Architecture, Sculpture, Painting*, ed. Toman (trans. Christian von Arnim et al.; Königswinter: Könemann, 2004), 9.

[14] Erwin Panofsky, *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St. Denis and its Art Treasures*, edited, translated and annotated by Erwin Panofsky (1946; second edn. Gerda Panofsky-Soergel, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), 51.

[15] Panofsky, 21-22.

[16] Panofsky, 63, 75. See also Panofsky's introduction, 18-25.

[17] Simson, 35-6.

[18] Contemporary designs offer intriguing dialectics with new technologies: witness the National Cathedral in Washington DC, where a fragment of moonrock, presented by the crew of Apollo 11, is embedded within the window depicting the moon and planets. My thanks to Jeffrey Cohen for showing me this window.

[19] Madeline Harrison Caviness, *Early Stained Glass of Canterbury Xathedral*, circa 1175-1220 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 104.

[20] Michael Camille, *Gothic Art: Visions and Revelations of the Medieval World* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1996), 83.

[21] Michael W. Cothren, *Picturing the Celestial city: the Medieval Stained Glass of Beauvais Cathedral* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 3.

[22] Bruce Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* (Chicago: University of

Chicago Press, 2005), 94-113.

[23] John Bowers, ed. *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteenth-century Continuations and Additions* (Kalamazoo, MI: published for TEAMS, the Consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Ages, Medieval Institute Publications, 1992).

[24] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983: rev. ed. London: Verso, 1999), 22-23. There is also a strong tradition in medieval satirical literature of criticising the vanity of such personal memorials.

[25] "And when we were rehearsing and blocking it out and I was standing way away from it, it became a little dance between the two of them. Each time they moved they got further apart from each other, physically, as they got further apart from each other in the scene. I was watching this and thought it was like a dance, and I could shoot it wide and save \$130,000, and save that grief for some other scene when I go over. I didn't know if it would work, but, keeping that in mind, we started using it as a dance and we shot the master and, right away, I knew it should be wide, and we only shot close-ups at the end of the day." J. Sperling Reich, "Director Brian Helgeland tells a knight's tale," <http://www.reel.com/reel.asp?node=features/interviews/helgeland> accessed June 10, 2009.

[26] Ian Christie, "'History is now and England': a Canterbury tale in its contexts," in *The Cinema of Michael Powell: International Perspectives on an English Film-maker*, ed. Ian Christie and Andrew Moor (London: BFI, 2005), 15.

[27] <http://www.kent.gov.uk/filmoffice/news-items/canterbury-tale-screening/> (June 15, 2009)

[28] A similar effect is shown in the BBC television programme, *The Vicar of Dibley*, in which the vicar, Geraldine Granger, raises money for a new stained-glass window for the church of St Barnabas, but donates most of the money to the victims of an earthquake in Colombia, and instead installs a plain glass window that similarly looks out onto a rather lurid sunset. "The Window and the Weather", 1994, first series. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCWHFDgYQ9A> (June 15, 2009)

[29] Vincent Ward, *Edge of the Earth: Stories and Images from the Antipodes*, with a foreword by John Boorman (Auckland: Heinemann, 1990), 89.

[30] "An interview with Vincent Ward," study guide for *The Navigator*, released by Ronin Films (ACT, 1988), 11.

[31] <http://www.fredcamper.com/Film/BrakhageS.html> (June 15, 2009)

[32] *By Brakhage: An Anthology*, with commentary by Fred Camper (Irvington, NY: Criterion collection, 2003).

[33] Burt, "Getting schmedieval", 219.

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