

# Performing British Identity: Arthur on Screen

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## Introduction

Arthur is undoubtedly one of the major heroes of British culture. Throughout the medieval period, he became a central character in art and literature and, from the Middle Ages onwards, he has lured writers, painters, composers, and all sorts of artists, more than any other medieval figure.<sup>1</sup> It is no wonder then that screenwriters and film directors also felt attracted to this compelling hero and decided to celebrate his deeds in motion pictures.

In this article we intend to reflect about representations of Arthur on screen. Impossible as it would be to speak about all the countless films that have depicted the Arthurian legends we decided to concentrate on two — *Excalibur* (John Boorman, 1981) and *King Arthur* (Antoine Fucqua, 2004) for several reasons:

- 1) While *Excalibur* centres on Arthur as a mythical hero emerging from Celtic myth, *King Arthur*, on the other hand, portrays a historical Arthur.
- 2) While *Excalibur* offers the perspective of an English director, *King Arthur* gives us the view of an American.
- 3) Besides the geographic distance between both directors, it would also be significant for us to single out the two films and analyse them separately in chronological terms. *Excalibur* was released in 1981, *King Arthur* appeared in 2004. There is, therefore, a time lapse of twenty-three years between them.

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<sup>1</sup> John Aberth estimates that 262 films, cartoons and TV shows have been made about the Arthurian legends, the first being a silent version of Richard Wagner's *Parsifal*, directed by Edwin S. Porter for the Edison Film Company, in 1904. (Aberth 1)

- 4) The two films are, therefore, very different in their approach to the figure of Arthur, conveying two paradoxical views about how Arthur is envisaged nowadays in modern cinema.

### Contextualizing the Figure of Arthur

Arthur is mentioned for the first time in *Historia Brittonum*, a Latin chronicle written in 829-30. In this text, Arthur is described not as a king, but as a military leader (*dux bellorum*). Pseudo-Nennius was writing in the context of the British (Welsh) conflicts against the Mercian kingdom governed by Saxon rulers. Arthur appears then as a British hero capable of expelling the Saxons out of British territory, much in the same way as the Welsh king of the time — Merfyn — to whom the chronicle is dedicated.

*Historia Brittonum*, though, connects this warrior of enormous courage and prestige to several marvellous episodes (*mirabilia*).<sup>2</sup> It is clear that *Historia Brittonum* sets the pattern for Arthurian tradition and literature in several important aspects, among which we would like to stress two:

- 1) We understand that, from the beginning, the figure of Arthur is surrounded by both historical and legendary aspects so inextricable that it is impossible to prove if he, in fact, existed or not.
- 2) The figure of Arthur was used from the very beginning to convey political and ideological ideas related to a specific time and place.

Arthur's fame soon began to grow and this military hero of supernatural strength acquired the status of a king. In 1136, in *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Geoffrey of Monmouth turns him into an Emperor and gives him a genealogy within another political context: that of the new Norman conquerors whom he wants to praise by giving them a hero that would rival and supersede the symbol of French monarchy — Charlemagne. With

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<sup>2</sup> Arthur allegedly defeated 960 Saxons with a single blow in the Battle of Badon Hill; he owns a dog the size of a horse, named Cafall; both Arthur and Cafall were known for persecuting a magical pig called Troynt; Cafall left the print of its hoof in a marvellous stone that cannot be moved from the place where it stands, and, finally, Arthur supposedly killed his only son, Amr, whose grave never shows the same length each time it is measured.

Geoffrey of Monmouth, the legend of King Arthur, as we know it today, is born. Through it, its author legitimizes the government of Norman monarchs who actually commissioned the book. Arthur becomes a model for a strong and powerful monarchy at an unstable time that coincides with the chaotic reign of King Stephen in England (1135-1154).

French romances gradually added new elements and episodes to a legend that gave origin to countless texts throughout the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, mainly the *Vulgate* and *Post-Vulgate* cycle of romances. These were sponsored by religious orders, particularly, the Cistercians, in a new medieval scenario no longer dominated only by the king as before, but also by the nobility that, by the 12th century, had expanded its power due to the feudal organization of society.

The French Arthurian romances substantiate this state of affairs in medieval Europe: on the one hand, the growing power of the nobility and of its knights over the king and, on the other, the spiritual control of the Church and the monastic orders over the social groups. Arthur, although king of an ideal court, becomes a *roi fainéant*, no longer participating in the adventures which are now performed by The Knights of the Round Table.

The Christianization of the Arthurian legend came to its climax in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Although Malory rewrites the whole legend drawing mainly from French sources, as well as from the Middle English Arthurian romances, he is placing Arthur within an English context again with an ideological concern. As the title of the book and the narrative indicate, Malory focuses on Arthur's death, which is also the death of a golden age: Arthur is gone, his main knights are dead, the Round Table collapsed and all these losses give the idea that a time of crisis is coming.

*Le Morte d'Arthur* was written in the aftermath of the Hundred Years War fought against the French, and contains a patriotic tone. At the same time, however, it was produced at a moment of civil war, during the War of the Roses. Malory is then denouncing the loss of aristocratic values in political as well as in moral terms.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the medieval source for most part of future retellings of the Arthurian legends is precisely *Le Morte d'Arthur*, perhaps because it is a condensation of early

From the Middle Ages onwards, this appropriation of the figure of Arthur in order to achieve political goals never ceased to happen. Alongside literary authors, political rulers also resorted to Arthur to legitimize their own governments. Henry II, Henry III, Edward I and Edward III, Henry V among others, they all saw in Arthur the perfect means to disseminate their propagandistic and political ideas.

In all these texts and contexts, Arthur is then a ductile figure that is shaped according to the main worries and characteristics of a specific social and cultural context.

### Arthur on Film

In 1987, Kevin Harty coined the expression *Cinema Arthuriana* which he defines as: “a form of medievalism, the attempt as old as the birth of the early modern or Renaissance period to revisit or reinvent the medieval world for contemporary purposes”.<sup>4</sup> By resorting to the legends of Arthur to reflect about modern times, *Cinema Arthuriana* has offered us countless films, some good, others not so much. The vast majority of these films tend, in fact, to be very poor. The reasons for this situation may lie on the fact that the Arthurian legends form a myriad of medieval texts that offer many difficulties for having been written from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, consisting of a vast collection of works that contain not only one legend of Arthur but many.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, in the absence of historical data that can prove the existence of a real Arthur, directors feel free to be highly

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material. However, Malory’s text was written in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, offering a perspective of the age of Arthur that is very different from what it might have been in 5<sup>th</sup> century Britain.

<sup>4</sup> Expression coined in Kevin J. Harty, “Cinema Arthuriana: A Filmography”, *Quondam et Futurus*, 17 (Spring, 1987), 5-8; 7 (Summer, 1987), 18. The definition is taken from: Kevin Harty, *Cinema Arthuriana, Twenty Essays*, North Carolina, McFarland, 2002, 7.

<sup>5</sup> “There was never a story of the Grail, and never could be. On the other hand there were stories of as many different Grails as there were writers exploring the potent name” (A. T. Hatto, preface to Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1980, 5)

imaginative, inventing episodes and characters that do not appear in the medieval sources, disregarding the very texts that gave rise to the legends. Some of these episodes are, in fact, extemporary as far as medieval culture is concerned. Actually, most directors feel free to draw on the figure of Arthur to reflect about the contemporary world of politics.

*Camelot*, for instance, is one of those cases. The film was released in 1967 and was directed by Joshua Logan, featuring Richard Harris in the role of Arthur and Vanessa Redgrave as Guinevere. This film is a musical and was based in the musical with the same name created by Lerner and Lowe in 1960 for Broadway. But while the musical debuted only three weeks after the election of J. F. K. as President, thus associating his government to the Golden Age of Arthur, *Camelot*, the movie, appeared after J. F. K.'s death, when the Americans were beginning to question their participation in the War of Vietnam. Hence, *Camelot*, the Broadway musical, makes the face of J. F. K. shine through Arthur's face, which stands as a symbol of the President's government, whereas *Camelot*, the film, is an appeal for the coming of another President Arthur-Kennedy type who could bring order to the country.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, both *Camelots* are inscribed in a political interest for the Arthurian legends which have always lured Americans. In the words of Winston Churchill:

[the legend of King Arthur is] a theme as well founded, as inspired, and as inalienable from the inheritance of mankind as the *Odyssey* or the Old Testament. Let us then declare that

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<sup>6</sup> A week after her husband's death, Jacqueline Kennedy gave an interview to Theodore H. White in which she clearly associates JFK to Arthur. In this interview, which has become popularly known as "The Camelot Interview" and resulted in an article published in *Life* magazine, Jaqueline quotes a line from the musical — "Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment, that was known as Camelot" — revealing that it belonged to J.F.K.'s favourite song from the film. At the same time, she identifies his government with the Golden Age of Camelot: "At night before going to bed...we had an old Victrola. He'd play a couple of records. I'd get out of bed at night and play it for him when it was so cold getting out of bed. It was a song he loved, he loved 'Camelot.' It was the song he loved most at the end... on a Victrola ten years old...it's the last record, the last side of 'Camelot', sad 'Camelot.'...'don't let it be forgot that for one brief shining moment there was Camelot.' (in <http://www.jfkplancer.com/pdf/Camelot.pdf>)

King Arthur and his noble knights, guarding the Sacred Flame of Christianity and the theme of a world order, sustained by the valour, physical strength, and good horses and armour, slaughtered innumerable hosts of foul barbarians and set decent folk an example for all time. (Finke and Schichtman 73)

Arthur's legends are then for America an example of world order. The reign of Arthur is the model of a good government set in a time when the king and his knights maintained the land in peace, following and fighting for the laws of Christendom, keeping the barbarians away and exalting chivalric values such as bravery, strength, loyalty and the defense of freedom. By the appropriation of the legends of Arthur, American artists and politicians "exalt the virtues of a putatively democratized chivalry and figure America as the true heir to Camelot's utopia, arguing that returning to the values of the days of King Arthur will ensure national peace and prosperity in the homeland and enforce a desirable American authority abroad." (Aronstein 2).

### **The Arthur of *Excalibur* by John Boorman (1981)**

*Excalibur* was directed by an Englishman and mainly filmed in Ireland.<sup>7</sup> It was released in 1981, having then divided opinions among critics. For the detractors of the film, the movie obliterates the important symbolism of Christianity in the Quest. Besides, the action is meant to have taken place in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, when Arthur supposedly lived, but the armours and castles seem to have come directly from the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

We believe that *Excalibur* is a very singular film in the context of Arthurian cinema and it has been very misunderstood mainly because to understand its plot and its images one has to be acquainted with the nature

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<sup>7</sup> John Boorman's first idea was to do a film about Merlin called *Merlin Lives!* But the studio (Universal Artists) suggested an adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien instead. However, the studio rejected the script, considering that the filming would prove extremely expensive and Boorman started to devise another story based on *Le Morte d'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory.

of the myths that were called upon. Boorman was not at all interested in capturing the medieval atmosphere of the 5<sup>th</sup> century or in conveying a portrayal of Arthur as the Christian King of French romances. In fact, although the film claims to have been based on Malory, the truth is that it is not a faithful rendering of *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

First of all, Boorman is not concerned about the historical truth as he himself stated to a journalist to whom he gave an interview in 1981: "I think of the story, the history, as a myth. The film has to do with mythical truth, not historical truth; it has to do with man taking over the world on his own terms for the first time. So the first trap to avoid is to start worrying about when or whether Arthur existed." (Kennedy, <http://americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm>) Boorman wanted to capture Celtic myth from which all the Arthurian legends emerged, creating a film that is totally ahistorical.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, more than drawing on Malory, *Excalibur* seems to have been inspired by such critical works as *The Golden Bough*, by Sir James Frazer, and *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie L. Weston, which reflect upon the importance of the cult of vegetation myths in pre-Christian times.

In this sense, the visual atmosphere of the film seems to have come directly from a Pre-Raphaelite painting, clearly alluding to the medieval imaginary created in the nineteenth century about Arthur and his knights: Guinevere (played by Cherie Lunghi) and Morgana (played by Helen Mirren) look like two Pre-Raphaelite *dames sans merci* with their long hair floating around them in an erotic and, at the same time, tempting and menacing way; the knight's armours are those of the knights portrayed in Pre-Raphaelite paintings; the scenes that evoke the *grass and flower* patterns of the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics, as well as the *greenerie* which

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<sup>8</sup> He stresses this idea when saying: "What I'm doing is setting it in a world, a period, of the imagination. I'm trying to suggest a kind of Middle Earth, in Tolkien terms. It's a contiguous world; it's like ours but different. I want it to have a primal clarity, a sense that things are happening for the first time. Landscape and nature and human emotions are all fresh. I tell the actors that they are not reenacting a legend. They are creating it, and so they themselves don't know what's going to happen — it's unfolding." (Kennedy, <http://americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm>)

surrounds characters and landscape, particularly the sword Excalibur, thus intensifying its symbolic meaning as an object that comes from the Other World; the sparkling shine of the knight's armours and of the lake which are also invested with a powerful significance as reflections of a spiritual light coming from primordial times when reality was perpassed by a sacred meaning. And of course, Arthur: first, the boy king, somewhat *naïve*, and later a man subjected to his fatal destiny. It is interesting that Boorman chose Nigel Terry — an actor coming from classical theatre — to play the role of Arthur, as he did with Nicol Williamson to play the role of Merlin. Terry manages to keep the balance between his hero-like qualities and his failure as a king, between his fury and his resignation.

Wagner's music also contributes to this misty and mysterious "Celtic atmosphere". "The Death of Siegfried" (from *Der Ring des Nibelungen*) and *Tristan and Isolde* help to create the tragic tone of the film, unfolding in an apocalyptic ending. In this sense, *Excalibur* consists of a dechristianization of the legends in many aspects. We would like to draw attention to two of these aspects: 1) Galahad is totally absent from the film and the outcome of the Quest is accomplished by one of the oldest Grail heroes — Percival; 2) The movie conflates Arthur with the Fisher King and with the Grail itself which serves Arthur and not Christ.

By centring the work in Celtic myth and distancing himself from French sources, Boorman is telling us one important thing: his film is going to be about England, and, in this sense, he is acting as much as Malory did five centuries ago. Let us remember that Malory, although based on French sources, replaced the legends in English soil, in a time when England was recovering from the Hundred Years War against the French, but starting an inner civil war with the Wars of the Roses. If Malory, with *Le Morte d'Arthur* intended to reclaim Arthur from the French in a patriotic urge, as Boorman also does, at the same time, he is warning those in command of the realm against the possible death of an age threatened from within in political as well as in moral terms, as we have said before. In a sense, Boorman is doing the same by resorting to Arthur in order to promote conservative values as the only means to guarantee peace in England, as we shall see further ahead.

In fact, in *Excalibur* we learn that the king and the land are one: if the king is wounded so is the territory, if the king is healthy the land will

prosper: “One land, one king”, as Arthur cries when he finds the Round Table. This lesson is taken from Celtic mythology, in which the king has to marry the goddess of the land in order to gain from her the Sovereignty that allows him to rule over the kingdom. The success of this union brings peace to the land. And peace is precisely the gift that Arthur brings to Britain in a time of blood and war. We learn, in the opening scenes of the film, that the land was immersed in a period of chaos and disorder. In this apocalyptic scenario, after Uther’s failure to be the one, Arthur emerges as the young hero who is destined to receive the sword of sovereignty and unite the whole territory and its people under his rule, thus bringing order into chaos. Furthermore, by identifying the Fisher King and the Grail with Arthur himself, the movie is investing the king with a divine aura. When the image of the Grail is replaced by the figure of Arthur, we realise that the movie suggests that the cup is a symbol of Arthur’s authority and monarchy and not the object associated with Christ and the Christianization of society.

The movie, then, promotes such values as those of political authority and social hierarchy as the only means to maintain peace. In this sense, *Excalibur* appeals to the conservative social values propagated by the government who held the power when the film was produced: the Thatcher government, very identical to Reaganism in America.<sup>9</sup> This idea led to Susan Aronstein’s claim that, even though the script for the film had been conceived a decade before Reagan’s presidency (1981-89), in *Excalibur*, Arthur acquires the status of a hero connected to the New American Right, together with Rambo, Rocky and Indiana Jones.

Arthur, then, becomes the symbol of these authoritative forms of policy. Therefore, *Excalibur* expresses nostalgia for a time of conservative values, a time when man was also one with nature, living in harmony with everything that surrounded him and accepting his place in the cyclical order of the universe.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Thatcher’s government ruled between 1979 and 1990 and Regan started his government as President of the USA in 1981, precisely the date when the film was released.

<sup>10</sup> “For a century now, we’ve been rushing headlong into the future; we’ve made a cult out of progress and we’ve forgotten our former selves, our former patterns of behavior,

However, this harmony does not seem to be perfect in *Excalibur*. First, because the goddess of the land abandons the king and, therefore, both the king and the land become ill. In *Excalibur*, the goddess of the land is identified with Guenevere, portrayed as the flower-maiden, particularly in the marriage scene. It is her betrayal of Arthur with Lancelot that breaks the bond between herself and the king, symbolized by the sword Excalibur, understood since the Middle Ages as one of the primal objects of the Goddess, that comes from the Other World to confirm the sovereignty of the monarch. When Arthur loses Excalibur, thrusting it between the two lovers he found naked in the woods, the land is wounded and so is Arthur. On waking up, Lancelot understands the consequences of his act, for he cries in fear: “The king without a sword. The land without a king.”

Second, since *Excalibur* gives us then the idea of a land governed by a noble king who is betrayed and trapped by all around him: by his sister, by his wife, by his best knight and friend, by his son. His reign, although golden and prosperous, contains the seeds of its own destruction for its end comes not from wars with foreign armies but from within. Finally, because the narrative is surpassed by images of violence, lust and greed and Arthur himself cannot escape his fatal destiny, having been conceived in a night of lust when Uther breaks the bonds of the peace he had signed with Gorlois for a moment with Igraine.<sup>11</sup>

This undermining of the fragility of the reign of Camelot contributes to the movie’s tragic tone that reaches its climax in the last scenes, when Arthur and Mordred kill one another in a scenario dominated by fire and blood, condemning the land to another period of chaos without heroes or kings (Arthur dies without leaving any successor).

Is Boorman in some way suggesting that history repeats itself, that

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whose origins can be traced to the Middle Ages. We no longer have any roots; and today, in particular, when we contemplate the possible destruction of our planet, there’s a thirst, a nostalgia for the past, a desperate need to understand it. We are attracted to the legend of the Grail because it speaks to us in a period when nature was unsullied and man in harmony with it.” (John Boorman *apud* Finke 80).

<sup>11</sup> Merlin to Uther: “So, you need me again, now that my truce is wrecked. Years to build and moments to ruin, and all for lust”. And later: “What issues from your lust [Arthur] shall be mine.”

his homeland — England — is re-enacting this same story? Is he speaking to us through Merlin's words: "it is the doom of man that they forget?"<sup>12</sup>

Although *Excalibur* is a product of the Thatcher-Reagan era, it also expresses Boorman's distrust of some of its values, rejecting, in Aronstein words, "the myths of individualism and the pursuit of personal gain central to Reagan's social and economic policies". (Aronstein 152)

Following Aronstein words, we intend to go a little further and suggest that what Boorman is really telling us is that there are no ideal rulers, that every government has its flaws and drawbacks. Even Arthur, the most mythical hero and king of all time, was far from perfect and, if the Golden Age he so successfully rose out of the ashes of civil war is an image of splendour and justice, it also hides evil, as the film clearly evidences in a dialogue between Arthur and Merlin:

Arthur: Tell me, Merlin, have we defeated evil?

Merlin: Good and evil, there is never one without the other.

Arthur: Where hides evil then in my kingdom?

Merlin: Always where you never expected. Always.

### **The Arthur of *King Arthur* by Antoine Fucqua (2004)**

The debate about the existence of Arthur has been going on for decades and it is far from knowing an end. This debate is, of course, futile and inconclusive since there are no archaeological data or texts known so far that can prove the historicity of Arthur.

Nevertheless, those who have claimed for an historical Arthur have presented several theories about who he might have been, the most well known being the one defended by Kemp Malone, in 1924, and more recently, the one suggested by C. Scott Littleton and Linda Malcor in *From*

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<sup>12</sup> Boorman assumes that he is in fact reflecting about England's state of affairs when he argues in the same interview that the Arthurian myth "(...) as with all myths, they took on the color of the age in which they were written. Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, for instance, or Burne-Jones and the Pre-Raphaelites described and painted the 12<sup>th</sup> century Arthurian tales in terms of their era. And they ended by telling you more about the Victorian age than about the legend." (Kennedy, <http://americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm>).

*Scythia to Camelot* (1994). According to Kemp Malone, the figure of Arthur has its origins in a Roman soldier called Lucius Artorius Castus, a commander of a Roman legion stationed in Britain in 2 A.D. The “Sarmatian hypothesis”, in turn, was defended by C. Scott Littleton and Ann C. Thomas in 1978.<sup>13</sup> These authors claim that the Arthurian legend derives from the Sarmatian troops that fought for Rome in Britain in 2 A.D. Linda Malcor was precisely the research consultant for *King Arthur*, the film that claims to present “the untold true story that inspired the legend”.<sup>14</sup>

In this sense, this movie stands in clear opposition to *Excalibur*, eliminating everything that has to do with myth: there is no Quest for the Grail, no wasteland, no Fisher King. But, if all the aspects referred to in the film intend to be historical, there are countless flaws and anachronisms, so many in fact that Shippey declares: “the strident claims of historical truth made by the producers (...) perhaps license one to say, in reply, that its history is at best dubious, and its geography frankly ludicrous.” (Shippey 310)

It is not our purpose in this article to point out those flaws but to reflect upon Arthur’s portrayal in the film where he begins to be introduced as the Sarmatian hero Artorius but ends up by rejecting the power of Rome, to set an allegiance with the Woads (the Picts), thus becoming King of all Britons.

The film builds, therefore, on ethnic identity, outlining the differences among Romans, Saxons, Sarmatians and British, and assigning them to two groups, each of them connected to good or evil. While Romans and Saxons are evil, Sarmatian and British are good. After defeating the Saxons and abandoning his utopian ideas about Roman civilization, Arthur marries Guinevere, the woad warrior-princess, reshapes his identity becoming a Breton and uniting all the British under his command.

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<sup>13</sup> Scott Littleton and Ann C. Thomas, “The Sarmatian Connection: New Light on the Origins of the Arthurian and Grail Legends” in *The Journal of American Folklore*, 1978, (in <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/539571?uid=3738880&uid=2&uid=4&sid=21101954191263>)

<sup>14</sup> Slogan in the DVD cover.

Nevertheless, *King Arthur* is mainly a film about freedom, as Tom Shippey clearly argues: at first, freedom of the Sarmatian warriors from the bond to the Romans, but later “freedom to make choices, (...) freedom from foreign domination, freedom as a natural state of humanity” (Shippey 316). Not only is the word “freedom” constantly repeated throughout the movie, but also the very ideals of liberty and free will are encapsulated in the figure of Arthur — a follower of Pelagianism, a defender of the weak, the founder of the Round Table. Arthur is portrayed as a noble and courageous warrior who believes that all men were created equal so that freedom is, in fact, a right that naturally belongs to the human race.

In this sense, the visual atmosphere of the film is totally different from that of *Excalibur*: there are no ethereal landscapes impregnated with symbolic meanings, but instead scenes that could actually have happened in a distant past in the real world.

Whereas Boorman features the Arthur of myth, Fucqua wants to portray Arthur the soldier — a real man who makes a way of living out of real fights, a man who goes to war without fear and trusting his own beliefs. Clive Owen fully meets the requirements of this role as a robust and board-shouldered actor whose muscles are evidenced throughout the film.

Fucqua seems interested in stressing Arthur’s warrior ideals and attitudes, which are also evidenced by the music originally composed by Hans Zimmer for the film. Although we may listen to some soft melodies that accompany the intimate scenes between Arthur and Guinevere, *King Arthur* mostly features a soundtrack with epic tones appropriate to reflect the marching of big armies and the pounding of hooves against the soil.

*King Arthur*, with its emphasis on war, has been considered by some as a late reaction to the War of Vietnam, mainly because David Frantoni, the scriptwriter, established that association in an interview led by John Matthews which was published in *Arthuriana*: “[The Arthurian story] became to me the American GI experience — strangers in a strange land, killing to stay alive and hating doing it.” (Matthews 116)

Furthermore, in another interview involving various participants in the film, the link between the narrative and the War in Vietnam is made again, this time by Jerry Bruckheimer, the film’s producer: “He [Frantoni] had it all worked out and in many ways it seemed similar to the fall of Saigon” (Hesse, <http://www.phase9.tv/moviefeatures/kingarthurfeature1>).

shtml) and again “We needed to pay heed to the legend, at the same time we needed to make him [Arthur] a universal soldier”. (Hesse, <http://www.phase9.tv/moviefeatures/kingarthurfeature1.shtml>)

The connections to the War in Vietnam are various, as Shippey again remarks:

If one follows this parallel through, in *King Arthur* what happens metaphorically, is that the surly and disillusioned American GI's (the Samartians), in Vietnam (Britain), free themselves from the imperial government that has turned its back on them (Rome or Washington), make common cause with their former enemies (the Woads, the Vietcong), and defeat their real enemies. (Shippey 316).

*King Arthur* is dealing with a wound that has never been healed by Americans even after three decades have passed over the Vietnam War. How can one deal with the fact that America has not won the war even when it was acting as a saviour to those oppressed by communism? How can one deal with the feeling of defeat or even with the sense of guilt awoken by images of the conflict? By presenting a hero in conflict with himself, who changes his mind, deciding to fight not for those whom he is supposed to obey, but for his own cause, *King Arthur* is sublimating the notion of free will and, at the same time, reassessing universal values. It is possible to act wrongly when, in the end, truth and virtue finally prevail.

This means that, even though Fucqua's film intended to present the real Arthur, in the end what matters is not if the King's historicity was proved or not, but, as in all the other films, what message does this hero and king convey to the world.

### **To conclude:**

Whether Arthur existed or not, his presence on screen fulfils the same role it has always accomplished from the very beginning, when the legends began to take form: his figure is used to convey or undermine certain ideological values and disseminate political agendas. In this sense, by retreating to a medieval past, the Arthurian films mentioned and *cinema arthuriana* in general draw on the figure of Arthur as a means to reflect on the present as an age of crisis. Arthur appears as a means to reflect about

the nature and exercise of power. He is a hero of all times designed to perform any role that can contribute to the maintenance of the various national identities, either British or American.

*Rex quondam, rex futurus*, the once and future king, Arthur was and will continue to be, in literature and on screen, the major hero of all time, “the great national fount of myth and symbol” in Peter Ackroyd’s words, always and forever adapting to every age and to every place. (Haydock 165).

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## Filmography

- Boorman, John. (dir) *Excalibur*, Warner Bros, running time: 135 minutes, DVD, 1981.
- Fucqua, Antoine. (dir) *King Arthur*, Touchstone Pictures, running time: 121 minutes, DVD, 2004.

**ABSTRACT**

Arthur is by far the most paradigmatic British hero. Appearing for the first time in the literary, as well as in the historical and political context of medieval Wales, as a Celtic war hero opposing the Saxon invaders, he soon crossed the borders of the Welsh territory to become the king of an entire nation. With the contribution of Geoffrey of Monmouth and subsequently of French and English medieval writers, Arthur not only turned into a symbol of kingship but mainly into the face of British territory and identity, embodying the fate and hopes of the British people. As a messianic hero, he is par excellence the protector of the land, a role fulfilled in the past that will be reenacted in a possible future.

From the Middle Ages onwards, the figure of Arthur has lured writers, painters, and artists in general. It is no wonder then that screen-writers and film directors also felt attracted to this potent hero and decided to celebrate his deeds through motion pictures. Is it thus our intention in this paper to reflect about Arthur and his presence on screen, taking two main films into consideration: *Excalibur* by John Boorman (1981) and *King Arthur* by Antoine Fuqua (2004).

**KEYWORDS**

Arthur; Boorman; *Excalibur*; Fuqua; *King Arthur*

**RESUMO**

Artur é certamente o herói mais paradigmático da cultura britânica. Tendo surgido pela primeira vez no contexto literário e político da Idade Média galesa enquanto herói celta que se opõe às forças saxônicas, Artur cedo transpõe as fronteiras do País de Gales para se tornar no rei de uma nação inteira. Com os textos de Geoffrey of Monmouth e dos escritores franceses e ingleses, Artur transformou-se num símbolo de realeza e, acima de tudo, no rosto do território e da identidade britânicos, corporizando o destino e a esperança do povo das Ilhas Britânicas. Enquanto herói messiânico, Artur é, por excelência, o protector da terra, um papel que cumpriu no passado e que voltará a desempenhar num possível futuro.

Desde a Idade Média que a figura de Artur tem seduzido escritores, pintores e todo o género de artistas. Não é, pois, de estranhar que também os argumentistas e realizadores de cinema se tenham sentido atraídos por este herói e decidido celebrar os seus feitos no grande ecrã. Neste artigo, pretendemos assim reflectir sobre a presença de Artur no cinema, recorrendo à análise de dois filmes: *Excalibur* de John Boorman (1981) e *King Arthur* de Antoine Fuqua (2004).

## PALAVRAS CHAVE

Arthur; Boorman; *Excalibur*; Fuqua; *King Arthur*

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