THE 2019 LOOMISES MEMORIAL LECTURE

James Bond, A Grifter, A Video Avatar, and a Shark Walk into King Arthur's Court: The Ever-Expanding Canon of Cinema Arthuriana

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Since 2014, elements of the Arthuriad have appeared in any number of films, often surprisingly so, given those film's genres, main characters, and plotlines. What such films demonstrate is the continued vitality of a unique form of Arthurian medievalism, cinema Arthuriana. (KJH)

—For Dorsey Armstrong, Joan Tasker Grimbert, Barbara Tepa Lupack, and Bonnie Wheeler—
'thre quenys . . . [and] the chyff lady of the laake.'[1]

For two reasons, both what I have called 'cinema Arthuriana'[2] and the 'reel' Middle Ages[3] have become, to paraphrase Langland's *Piers Plowman*, 'fair feld[s] ful of folk.'[4] First, scholars in a variety of disciplines have increasingly turned their critical attention to the study of cinema medievalia,[5] and, second, filmmakers have continued to engage the medieval either directly or tangentially for their works on both the big and small screen.

Cinema medievalia seems to have begun with Alfred Clark's now lost 1895 kinetoscope for Thomas A. Edison, *Joan of Arc*, which briefly showed Joan's death by burning at the stake.[6] Edison would also have a hand in the oldest example of cinema Arthuriana, Edwin J. Porter's 1904 *Parsifal*, a failed attempt to film a staging of Wagner's opera.[7] The first Arthurian film with what could be considered at least a partial medieval source is Giuseppe de Liguoro's 1910 *Il Re Artù e i cavaliere della tavola rotunda*,[8] which nods to Malory. But the history of early cinema Arthuriana clearly shows that filmmakers, while embracing the Arthuriad, did so on their own terms.

The Boy Scouts of America, for example, sponsored another Edison film, the 1917 *Knights of the Square Table; or, The Grail*,[9] in which two groups of boys, one a troop of virtuous scouts and the other a gang of miscreants and

ne'er-do-wells, compete inspired by a copy of Howard Pyle's 1903 novel *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights*.[10] Similarly, the Grail itself—or at least Tennyson's version of the Grail—turns up in New York in Clarence Brown's 1922 film *The Light of Faith*, when a wealthy playboy finds the sacred cup in the ruins of an English church, and brings it home to Manhattan where its healing powers cure the critically ill girl, whom he has just jilted, and reform a career criminal, who has befriended her in her time of need.[11]

These two films are part of a continuing tradition in cinema Arthuriana. King Arthur films are less likely to be based on canonical Arthurian texts[12] than they are to be amalgamations of details from such texts with non-Arthurian plot lines, and such films establish an important distinction relative to medieval film in general and to Arthurian film in particular. Cinema medievalia and cinema Arthuriana are not film genres. Rather, they are both a form of (neo-) medievalism[13] that can be found in multiple cinematic genres.

What I want to discuss in this essay are some recent films in which elements of the Arthuriad pop up, sometimes rather surprisingly, in more and more cinematic genres. As I asked rhetorically in two earlier essays, just where today is the cinematic Arthur to be found,[14] and might we be looking for him in all the wrong places?[15] For every film such as Richard Thorpe's *Knights of the Round Table* or John Boorman's *Excalibur*,[16] there are many more films like *Knights of the Square Table* and *The Light of Faith*, especially recently.

THE KINGSMAN FRANCHISE

In Matthew Vaughn's 2014 *Kingsman: The Secret Service*,[17] James Bond vies for a place at the Round Table with a trusty squire in tow. Based on a six-part comic book series, *The Secret Service*, by Mark Millar and Dave Gibbons,[18] Vaughn's film retains the basic secret agent plot of its source, but adds to that source a less than subtle Arthurian twist by providing the agents with Arthurian code names—Arthur, Lancelot, Galahad, Perceval, and Merlin—and by offering its own versions of two fairly common Arthurian narremes: the story of the Fair Unknown and the promise of the Arthurian return in a time of need.

The film's plot details an attempt by a megalomaniac to cull two thirds of humanity to eliminate global overpopulation. In the original comic book series, the megalomaniac, who likes to kidnap actors who played roles in the *Star Wars* franchise, has taken Mark Hamill (*Star Wars*' Luke Skywalker) hostage. In the film, Mark Hamill himself plays a more than hapless climate scientist named James Arnold. In the comic book series, the megalomaniac is thwarted by a secret agent and his nephew; in the film, by a decidedly upper class secret agent and his equally decidedly working class misfit of a protégé and, given the film's Arthurian and more general medieval connections, squire.

The film opens in the Middle East in 1997 when Colin Firth's Harry Hart (code name Agent Galahad) is unable to prevent a fellow agent from being killed during an interrogation gone wrong. Fast forward seventeen years to Argentina, where an agent with the code name Lancelot attempts to rescue kidnapped university professor and climate change doomsayer James Arnold, in the process single-handedly killing more than a half dozen of his captors only then to be himself literally cut in half by a woman with razor-sharp, Oscar Pistorius-like legs that give new meaning to the idea of stiletto heels.

The death of Lancelot leaves a vacancy in Kingsman, an organization based out of a Savile Row tailor shop that has been supplying bespoke suits to the most powerful men since 1849—a gentleman never buys off the peg. H. Huntsman & Sons in Savile Row has been doing so since 1849, and is the setting for the film's tailor shop.[19] In the film, when the sons of these most powerful men were killed in the First World War, their inheritances were pooled to fund an independent international intelligence agency, Kingsman, which has been operating ever since, clandestinely and above politics, to right wrongs globally. Headed by Chester Arthur King (Michael Caine), the members of Kingsman meet around a table—rectangular, alas, not round—to plan their operations, to toast their deceased brothers, and to seek their replacements. Caine's Arthur is a dyed-in-the wool (or is it tweed?) class-bound snob who wants to limit the ranks of Kingsman to those with Oxbridge pedigrees. Firth's Galahad takes a more democratic view and sponsors Gary 'Eggsy' Unwin, son of the agent killed in 1997, who is at first an unemployed Royal Marine dropout living on a council estate. Eggsy's one memento of his father is a medal of valor acknowledging the dead secret agent's service to Queen and country.

The villain of the film is Richmond Valentine (played by a lisping, over-the-top Samuel L. Jackson), a communications multi-billionaire determined to cull the world's population, thereby eliminating undesirables and ensuring the survival of those whom he deems the fittest. His assassin sidekick is the razor-blade-legged Gazelle (Sofia Boutella). Valentine's plan is put into motion when he provides everyone in the world with a free SIM card, and those whom he will save with an implanted micro-chip that will protect them when the culling takes place—or that will, unfortunately, blow their heads off if wrongly activated. Using those SIM cards, Valentine will send everyone a message to trigger a murderous global rampage and the resulting cull. But Valentine is not totally successful in winning those whom he would save over to his cause, and a number of VIPs and heads of state, including Sweden's influential and voluptuous Princess Tilde (Hanna Alström), have gone missing.

Galahad arranges for Eggsy's training as a possible member of Kingsman under the tutelage of agent code name Merlin (Mark Strong)—the film's Bondian Q character— and then goes off to track down the missing VIPs and

heads of state. At this point, the film's narrative switches between Galahad's quest and Eggsy's apprenticeship. Galahad manages to find Climatologist Arnold, whose head soon explodes thanks to the chip implanted behind his ear by Valentine. Posing as a billionaire himself, Galahad subsequently meets with Valentine and learns of his plans, eventually following him to a Kentucky church that preaches a gospel based on hate. When Valentine triggers a massive brawl in the church, Galahad kills every member of the congregation before Valentine kills him.

Eggsy meanwhile is having mixed success in his training, which pits him against the Oxbridge crowd who dismiss him from the get-go because of his humble working-class origins. The search to find someone to succeed Lancelot comes down to two candidates, and the more level-headed Roxy (Sophie Cookson) bests Eggsy, further fueling Arthur's hidebound prejudices against the working classes. But it turns out that Arthur himself has been compromised and has joined forces with Valentine, so it is up to Roxy, Merlin, and Eggsy, who uses a bit of working-class sleight of hand to thwart Arthur's attempt to kill him, to save the world. Eggsy and Merlin assault Valentine directly in his bunker, while Roxy, using a high-altitude balloon, temporarily knocks out the communications satellite tied to Valentine's SIM cards. When Valentine restores the satellite thanks to a little help from his ally, the President of the United States, Merlin overrides Valentine's signal and blows off the heads of everyone in Valentine's bunker and then those of all of his other allies around the world in an at-times hilarious, an at-times gratuitously violent, CGI sequence acted out to the accompaniment of *Pomp and Circumstance*. Eggsy then fights and defeats Gazelle, thanks to a poison tipped blade in the toe of his bespoke Oxfords—the only shoes a true gentleman would wear. Eggsy, champagne flutes and bottle in hand, then rescues Princess Tilde who had promised him that she would make sure things ended well for him once he saved the world.

Kingsman is both reverential and comic (and, in one instance, more than a bit crass) in its treatment of the secret agent film genre. In the film, Galahad and Valentine have several exchanges in which they lament the sorry current state of the genre as opposed to its golden age with the early- to mid-Bond films from Pinewood Studios. Winks and nods abound in the film to other examples of the genre. Both Firth and Strong appeared in Tomas Alfredson's 2011 *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, and Caine took a turn as the title character's father in Jay Roach's 2002 *Austin Powers in Goldmember*; Jackson has become a regular in film and on television in several of the MARVEL comic franchises. James Bond's nemesis in Roger Spottiswoode's 1997 *Tomorrow Never Dies* was another communications mogul and megalomaniac, Elliott Carver, played by Jonathan Pryce. The Bond franchise had already moved down the social ladder in 2012 with the casting of Daniel Craig as a more rugged looking,

slightly less polished Bond in Martin Campbell's 2006 *Casino Royale* and its sequels—Eggsy's characterization as a Bond-like character just moves a bit further down market.

Early in *Kingsman*, Lancelot, Professor Arnold and Valentine all share a tumbler of rare 1962 Dalmore Whiskey, which was featured in the 2012 Bond film *Skyfall*. Lancelot and Eggsy's weapon of choice is an umbrella reminiscent of John Steed's in the popular 1960s' television series *The Avengers*. Eggsy's pug is named JB for Jack Bauer, the hero of Fox television's 2001–2010 series *24*—not for Jason Bourne or for James Bond, as Arthur guesses. The poison knife-tipped Oxfords, worn by both Galahad and Eggsy, are straight out of Terrence Young's 1963 Bond film *From Russia with Love*, where more sensible working-class shoes with a concealed blade in their tip are the signature weapon of Rosa Klebb (Lotta Lenya), former SMERSH Colonel and current Chief Operations Officer for SPECTRE. Valentine's mountain lair and cave landing strip are reminiscent of those of Ernst Stavro Blofeld, the villain in multiple Bond films in the 1960s. Sophomorically, in a somewhat startling variation on a Bondian set cinematic conclusion, Eggsy does end up with the girl, but *Kingsman* records their encounter not with a deft pun or with a bit of sexual innuendo, but rather with an in-your face shot confirming that Eggsy does indeed 'end up' quite well—he ends *up* Princess Tilde's butt!

More interesting for my purposes are the Arthurian and medieval elements that the film adds to the original comic book series. Again, the film assigns agents Arthurian code names. Eggsy's father's medal for valor shares a design suggestive of that of Gawain's 'endeles knot' in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.[20] Galahad's—and eventually Eggsy's—personal motto is 'Manners makyth man,' also the motto of Winchester College and of New College, Oxford—both founded in the fourteenth century by Bishop William Wykeham.[21] Kingsman tailors provide bespoke suits which, the film tells us, are 'the modern gentleman's armor,' while the Kingsman himself is 'the new knight.' And Eggsy and his mates hang out at the Black Prince Pub.

Eggsy, given his working class pedigree, is also the latest incarnation of the popular folk motif known as the 'Fair Unknown,' a motif with especially strong connections to the Arthuriad.[22] That motif posits a young man of questionable or unknown lineage, who is at times amusingly uninhibited (cf. the final encounter with Princess Tilde), and who becomes a hero saving the society that at first rejects him. Eggsy, following the motif, must prove his worth through a series of adventures. While Arthurian variations on the motif grant the Fair Unknown a relationship with the Round Table through kinship—he is often a relative of Gawain and thus, by extension, of Arthur, Gawain's uncle—in *Kingsman*, Eggsy becomes Galahad's adopted son and heir.

In a further Arthurian connection, *Kingsman* trades on the myth of Arthur's promised return—the so-called 'Breton hope'—a key element of the

Arthuriad from at least the twelfth century. Based on the belief that Arthur lies dormant—not dead—in his tomb, the myth promises his awakening to come to the aid of England, or even of the entire world, in a time of future need or peril.[23] In *Kingsman*, Arthur has risen from the ashes of the First World War and returned with his knights, but he is eventually killed. However, his decidedly more democratic and inclusive legacy lives on in Eggsy who seems well prepared to work with Kingsman in its future efforts to defeat any and all forces of evil that threaten the peace and stability of the world.

In *Kingsman*, we have the first adaptation of the Arthuriad as a secret agent film—with decidedly mixed results—but with a clear promise of yet another return. *Kingsman* ends on a note that sets us up for a sequel, if not for a franchise of sequels. And indeed, in 2017, Matthew Vaughn directed the first such sequel, *Kingsman: The Golden Circle*,[24] a film more loosely connected to the Arthuriad than its predecessor. In the sequel, a year has passed, and Eggsy has taken his late mentor's name Galahad as the Kingsman organization comes under attack from Poppy Adams (Julianne Moore), the leader of the Golden Circle, the world's largest drug cartel. The attack destroys the Kingsman organization and kills the new Arthur (Michael Gambon) and all the agents in Britain except Eggsy and Merlin, who follow a disaster protocol that leads them to Statesman, the American counterpart of Kingsman. Statesman poses as a Kentucky-based bourbon distillery, and once there Eggsy and Merlin discover that Harry Hart has survived his battle with Valentine, though not without the loss of an eye and his memory. The head of Statesman, Champagne (Jeff Bridges), offers the organization's support to bring down the Golden Circle. Just as all the members of Kingsman have Arthurian monikers, all the members of Statesman have alcohol-related monikers. And the bad boy of Statesman—Eggsy's counterpart—is Agent Tequila (Channing Tatum).

Poppy has laced all the drugs that the Golden Circle distributes with a toxin that brings on paralysis and eventual death. She is willing, however, to offer an antidote to the toxic drugs if the American President (Bruce Greenwood) will call off the war on drugs and grant her and the members of the cartel blanket immunity from prosecution for all their crimes. The President agrees, though he secretly decides to let everyone die because he is more than happy to kill off all drug users and put Poppy out of business.

Eggsy, Harry, and Merlin fly off to Poppy's headquarters in Cambodia, and thwart her plans, rescuing along the way Elton John who has been held prisoner and forced to sing for Poppy.[25] The American President is impeached, and Statesman purchases a distillery in Scotland to help rebuild Kingsman. Eggsy decides to retire from Kingsman and to marry Princess Tilde. But Harry warns us that this is simply the end of the beginning of Kingsman—suggesting further sequels are to follow. In the film's final scene, Agent Tequila dressed

to the nines struts down Savile Row to Kingsman's new London tailor shop, perhaps on his way to begin the adventures in one of those sequels.

MAD MAX: FURY ROAD

The quest for the Holy Grail has long been a key narreme in the Arthuriad.[26] George Miller's 2015 film *Mad Max: The Fury* Road, the fourth installment in the director's Mad Max franchise,[27] marks a continuation of the eponymous hero's quest for meaning in life, albeit a continuation in which he plays a decidedly secondary role. *Fury Road* is, at its heart, a radical regendering, if not queering, of the Mad Max franchise. With a decidedly less complicated plot than its three predecessors, *Fury Road* consists of two extended chases, one away from and one back to the Citadel, the castle-like base of the tyrannical Immortan Joe (Hugh Keays-Byrne), a disfigured hunk of a man who recalls the Humungus in *Road Warrior*. Joe enslaves the remnants of humanity in a vast wasteland by controlling the supply of water, oil, and, interestingly, mother's milk, as he sets out to breed a progeny to ensure dynastic continuation of his control. Joe's army consists of white skinned genetic mutant fanatics called War Boys, who regularly require periodic blood transfusions from captives who have been turned into human blood bags.

Bits and bobs, small (a wind-up music box played by the Feral Kid in the second film) and large (the value and the scarcity of gasoline), reappear in *Fury Road* from the three earlier films, but *Fury Road* is a very different kind of film about very different issues. In *Fury Road*, the central character, who constantly upstages Tom Hardy's Max Rockatansky, is Charlize Theron's Imperator Furiosa, whom we later learn is a member of a matriarchal tribe called the Vuvalini. With her almost-shaved head and prosthetic right arm, Furiosa is a match for anyone, male or female. She decides to rescue Joe's five brides. She devises a plan to exchange oil for safe passage through enemy lands, she rescues Max, and she is the character who finally comes to seek redemption. Unlike the three previous films in the franchise, *Fury Road*, is, in the final analysis, a film about finding redemption by returning to what the film calls the 'Green Place.' If, in the earlier films, Max had been a possible post-Apocalyptic Grail Knight, here he becomes the wounded Fisher King.

As the film opens, Max is alone, haunted by memories of his daughter and wife, whose death he was unable to prevent earlier in the films in the franchise. His meditative moment literally lasts just a moment, as he is immediately captured by a marauding group of Mad Boys and turned into the most-prized of blood bags because he is O-negative, once thought the blood type of those who were safely universal donors. The film never quite explains what is wrong with the Mad Boys, but their anemic appearance, their lack of body hair, and their regular need for blood transfusions suggest some kind of fatal hemolytic genetic disorder, and their tumor-like lumps suggest some form of cancer.

That there are no old Mad Boys also suggests that their life span is decidedly limited. In addition to frequent transfusions, they are further sustained by their rabid devotion to Joe who rewards them by spraying their mouths with chrome-colored paint to induce some kind of high, and who promises them glory in Valhalla if they should die fighting for him. Religion in the film is at best murky—later in the film, one of Joe's brides prays for deliverance while admitting that she has no idea to whom (or what) she is praying. In Norse mythology, Valhalla is, of course, the heaven that welcomes warriors who die weapon in hand, but the youthful unswerving fanaticism of the War Boys, who almost rabidly expect paradise in exchange for martyrdom, has contemporary echoes not easily lost on moviegoers today. Max and Furiosa cross paths when she decides to liberate Joe's brides—Joe's harem being yet another nod to contemporary religious and political issues—and to return with them to the Green Place of her youth.

Furiosa becomes the Grail Knight, and she queers the franchise in a number of other ways. Her title 'Imperator' is the masculine form in Latin, but her name, 'Furiosa,' is the feminine, and that name recalls the hero of Ludovico Ariosto's early sixteenth century epic poem *Orlando Furioso*.[28] Furiosa's outfits are decidedly non-gendered, and her hair style and grease-painted forehead further suggest her non-binary identity. *Fury Road* is much more decidedly a Quest film than its three predecessors. The Grails here are several, and the Grail questors are many. But the film's conclusion, in which the matriarchy trumps the patriarchy as the Citadel becomes a gynotopia, is what most radically queers the *Mad Max* franchise. In *Fury Road,* Furiosa becomes the final focus—the Imperator of the Citadel—as Max fades into the crowd at the film's end, perhaps to return in future films, perhaps not.

Fury Road's Max is as taciturn as his franchise predecessors, and it is the Perceval-like Furiosa who asks him the key question—'what is your name?'—to which she receives no immediate reply. The first word of the film's subtitle nods to Furiosa, and Furiosa is the character intent upon seeking redemption, specifically by returning to, or ultimately by reinventing, the Green Place. Throughout the franchise, Max is looking for revenge; it is Furiosa who heals all wounds, and her final act is to unleash the healing waters of Aqua Cola from deep within the Citadel, as she and her Vuvalini sisters recreate the Green Place on its site. In doing so, Furiosa becomes the Perceval figure in what is admittedly a fascinating, and perhaps brilliant, queering of the traditional Grail quest.[29]

READY PLAYER ONE

Yet another post-Apocalyptic quest can be found in Steven Spielberg's 2018 film *Ready Player One*, based on Ernest Cline's 2011 novel of the same title.[30] In the preface to their collection of essays on *King Arthur in Popular Culture*,

Elizabeth S. Sklar and Donald L. Hoffman assert that 'the Matter of Arthur speaks . . . to our wishes, anxieties, desires, and above all to our innate sense of play.'[31] Taking their cue from Sklar and Hoffman, Susan Aronstein and Jason Thompson argue that Ernest Cline's 2011 novel, *Ready Player One,* successfully

> translates Arthurian tropes into its gaming narrative—the Wasteland into the Global Energy Crisis, the Grail knight into the gamer, the Sword in the Stone into the Guitar in the Stone, the Holy Grail into Anorak's egg, and the Kingdom Restored into the World Made Better—[thereby teaching] . . . Cline's audience to read, play, and come to see Arthur anew at the same time that it uses its Grail legend to comment on what Cline posits as the Wasteland of the gaming and digital culture the novel seems to celebrate.[32]

We would then expect yet another cinematic Arthurian quest in Steven Spielberg's film adaptation of the novel.

The Oasis, the immersive video game universe in which most of the film takes place, looks like a high-end video game come to life. People now spend all their time in the virtual world of the Oasis, piloting their digital avatars. In his will, an eccentric named James Halliday (Mark Rylance) leaves ownership of his multi-billion-dollar company and the Oasis to whoever successfully completes a quest for an 'Easter Egg' in the digital world he has created. Wade Watts (Tye Sheridan), using his avatar Parzival, hunts for the prize. In the novel, Wade's adventure is cast as both an archetypical heroic journey and a full-fledged Grail quest, but the film all but eliminates the novel's Arthurian connection. Wade's love interest (Olivia Cooke) does reveal the significance of his avatar's name: 'You're Parzival. As in the knight who found the Holy Grail by himself'—but her comment is the only explicit reference to the Grail quest in the film.

Nonetheless, the Grail quest is successful in Spielberg's *Ready Player One*, though, in the final analysis, that success seems beside the point in the film. Critics were unimpressed with the film and generally failed to notice the at-best-incidental Arthurian links that carry over from the book to the film, or to lament the film's loss of its source's closer ties to the Arthuriad. Curiously, Spielberg decided to exclude many references to his own earlier work in a film steeped in 1980s nostalgia. And Spielberg chooses somewhat higgledy-piggledy what 1980s references he does include—Stanley Kubrick's 1980 film *The Shining*, for instance. The film takes place in a post-Apocalyptic Ohio in 2045, and its references to 1980s popular culture do not come together into a cohesive whole, in part because there is more to the novel than simply nostalgia for a lost past. The novel is at its core Arthurian not Proustian; the film is just the opposite.[33]

KING ARTHUR: LEGEND OF THE SWORD

Guy Ritchie's 2017 film *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword* has not been well-received by critics or by Arthurian enthusiasts.[34] The negative reception is unfortunate since *Legend of the Sword* is, I would argue, a better film than it gets credit for being. Of recent Arthurian films, it is at once traditional—it is based on part of an established medieval version of the Arthuriad—and innovative—it does not attempt to present the whole story of King Arthur, Malorian or otherwise—a mistake too often made by film directors and their screenwriters. Rather, it tells how an unlikely grifter becomes King Arthur.[35]

Ritchie's main sources are Geoffrey of Monmouth[36] and the television series *Game of Thrones*—a series that may yet prove the most enduring source for, and of, (neo-) medievalism, but that argument needs to be explored more fully elsewhere. Ritchie is also indebted, in no particular order, to the story of the infant Moses floating among the reeds on the Nile, the account of Hannibal and his elephants, the cases of Sherlock Holmes, the martial training typically undertaken by Kung Fu masters and gladiators, the Harry Potter series in print and on screen, Macbeth's 'weird sisters,' Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia, the Viking raids on England, some of his own previous films, the current plight of those who are different—in the film's case the Mage who once lived peacefully with mankind and now have been forced into the shadows as the refugees whom no one wants—and even the Trumpian tendency to miscalculate the size of crowds, though here Vortigern underestimates (rather than overestimates) the size of the adoring masses who show up to see him (try to) execute Arthur. They are not, as Vortigern avers, in the hundreds, but in the hundreds of thousands, if not millions. There are also in the film all kinds of winks and nods and in jokes, along with a brief appearance by David Beckham as a bad-ass black-armor clad knight named 'Trigger'—presumably without any intended reference to the horse once ridden by the King of the Cowboys.

From the Arthuriad, Ritchie has been selective in what he has borrowed. His film includes Mordred as a rebel Mage who is killed off early in the film, Merlin by way of an avatar eagle, Uther and Igraine without even a mention of the 'unusual' coupling that produced Arthur, Vortigern and his tower built atop a lake, a sword originally firmly embedded in a stone and later returned by the Lady of the Lake after it has been cast upon the waters by an Arthur reluctant to embrace his destiny, an almost completed round table, and an assortment of knights, some of whose names are familiar enough (Percival, Tristan, and Bedivere) and some of whose names are not (George and Goosefat Bill)—all enhanced with non-stop CGI effects and an at-times deafening soundtrack.

Ritchie's film, like all examples of cinema Arthuriana (no matter how indebted they are to the legend of the once and future king), is inevitably

caught between a rock and a hard place. Arthurian films must confront what Norris J. Lacy has called an audience's expectations which are tied to the 'tyranny of tradition,'[37] despite the apparent latitude provided by Helen Cooper's dictum in the first of the three part Films for Humanities series *Tracing the Arthurian Tradition* that each age invents the Arthur it needs.[38]

As the film opens, Uther (Eric Bana) is intent upon putting an end to a war between his people and the Mage, little knowing that his younger brother, Vortigern, has been plotting with Mordred (Rob Knighton), the Mage's leader, to seize the throne from his older brother. Uther defeats Mordred, whose armies arrive atop and within huge elephants, and peace would seem to be at hand but for Vortigern's schemes. In seizing the throne, Vortigern is aided by three cephalopodan 'weird sisters' worthy of the Scottish play,[39] who demand he sacrifice his wife—and eventually his daughter—to achieve the victories he wants, in a devil's bargain that outdoes that of Agamemnon. Vortigern—Jude Law, at times on steroids, who spends most of the film chewing up the scenery and seemingly having a better time being in the film than most critics had in watching it—is the nastiest of villains. Law is a Ritchie veteran, having played Watson in the director's deconstruction—some would argue destruction—of the story Sherlock Homes,[40] and the huge snarling dogs that guard his throne are worthy of the Baskervilles. Vortigern kills Uther and Igraine, and the boy Arthur escapes Vortigern, floating in a small boat Moses-like down the Thames to Londinium, a metropolis whose on-screen population seems as culturally diverse as that of its present day namesake. Once in Londinium, Arthur is rescued not by Pharaoh's daughter but by some kind- hearted prostitutes, who rear him, until he can in turn provide them protection from their at times less-than-genteel clientele, who include the odd Viking, it turns out, under the protection of Vortigern.

More than somewhat of a light-weight to play Arthur, Charlie Hunnam is nonetheless a Ritchie type—indeed he seems straight out of the director's 1998 breakout film *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels*[41] in scenes replete with the director's stock stop-action camera work and he-said-he-said patter. Like the characters in *Two Barrels*, Arthur and his crew here are good-natured con men and petty criminals enforcing their own code of justice among the poor and oppressed against a totally corrupt civil authority—think Robin Hood lite. Vortigern, cursed by the promise that whosoever draws the sword from the stone will be rightful king, demands every able bodied man in his kingdom attempt to do so—he is also, for good measure, buying off the Vikings by promising them thousands of young English boys a year in tribute. Medieval versions of the Arthuriad have Arthur himself taking a page from Herod as he murders all boy children born in May in an attempt to prevent Mordred, his successor, from growing up.[42] Here the boys are simply being sent off as human tribute, as Vortigern's England has become a vassal state to the Vikings.

Arthur draws the sword from the stone, but is unable to harness its power. Imprisoned by Vortigern who wants a show trial to debunk the myth that has sprung up around Arthur, the reluctant hero is rescued by Mage (Astrid Berges-Frisbey) and a motley crew of renegade knights, whose number include Aidan Gillen's Goosefat Bill Wilson. Gillen is Little Finger (a pimp no less) in *Game of Thrones*, one of Ritchie's sources, and Gillen and Hunnam have an earlier connection though the British version of the 1999-2000 television series *Queer as Folk*, in which Hunnam played the gay teenager who is seduced by (and subsequently becomes a lover to) the older Gillen's character. And other of these renegade knights have just as unusual an assortment of monikers as do the crew in *Two Barrels*.

When Arthur is finally rescued from Vortigern, he is not at all eager to embrace the destiny that is his. Only when he learns that Vortigern has destroyed the brothel that was his home and killed many of his friends does he overcome his initial reluctance. To prepare for what destiny holds for him, he has the expected passage through nature, here called the Dark Land, that tests many a hero, and which introduces him to a number of nightmare-like creatures that will be all too familiar to fans of Harry Potter, most notably a very, very large serpent. Having regained Excalibur with help from the Lady of the Lake, Arthur prepares to defeat Vortigern, whose power is tied to the height of the Godfriedian tower that he is building. In a final battle, Arthur manages to kill the overly steroidal and now CGI enhanced Vortigern, and establish peace in his realm, 'renegotiating' the treaty with the Vikings, and, with an obvious nod to an anticipated sequel, beginning work on the round table.

But given the film's dismal performance when it opened, and its cost—it reportedly cost more than $300 million to make and took in less than $15 million its first weekend—a Ritchie Arthurian franchise quickly became a nonstarter, which is in some ways unfortunate.[43] *King Arthur* is not a great film—whether there are any great Arthurian films is a matter of some debate. (There are certainly great medieval films—*Alexander Nevsky*, *The Nibelungenlied, The Passion of Joan of Arc, The Seventh Seal,* and *The Virgin Spring* to name only a few.) Ritchie's film does avoid the trap of other examples of cinema Arthuriana (and the tyranny of tradition) in not trying to tell the whole story of Arthur. There is no Grail, no Guinevere,[44] no love triangle. And, if each age does indeed invent the Arthur it needs, ours is an age without great heroes—and, perhaps worse, one without any recognition that we even need great heroes. Hunnam's low-keyed Arthur might, therefore, be just the Arthur for our times. And with its sources in Geoffrey and in *Game of Thrones,* Ritchie's *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword* is a more than interesting, appropriately double-barreled mix of both medievalism and neo-medievalism as film.

KING ARTHUR AND THE KNIGHTS OF THE ROUND TABLE

Jared Cohn's 2017 direct-to-video film *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table*[45] is by any measure not a good film, but it is a very good example of the ways in which the Arthuriad has popped up, sometimes unexpectedly, in multiple film genres. The film was released direct to video just ten days before Ritchie's *Legend of the Sword*, perhaps to exploit any success that the Ritchie film might have had. The Cohn film begins in sixth-century Britain with a familiar enough incident: the final battle, here in a subterranean cave, between Morgana (Sara Malakul Lane) and Arthur (Byron Gibson) for control of Camelot. Arthur is assisted by Merlin (Harold Diamond) and the remnant of the brotherhood of the Round Table; Morgana has her son by Arthur, Mordred (Russell Geoffrey Banks), as, it turns out, a more-than reluctant ally. The keys to controlling Camelot are a magical red amulet and Excalibur.

Morgana wants revenge; Mordred wants redemption. Arthur and Merlin prevail and encase Morgana and Morgan in a giant stone and banish them to the ends of the universe. Fast forward to present day Bangkok, and a group of friends, all former US Marines, who are also descendants of Arthur and his noble knights, have gathered for a martial arts competition organized by Gunner (Jon Nutt) who knows all about King Arthur because, he says, 'I have an MA in Medieval History!'

Soon enough, without much explanation as to how, Morgana and Morgan magically appear in Bangkok courtesy of a space capsule, and set out to find Excalibur, which has been transformed from a sword into a golden cup, the Holy Grail. The Grail is in the care of a Buddhist nun named Elaine (Asia Marie Burnet), who is also a masseuse in what may or may or may not be the sort of rub and tug establishment patronized by the likes of Robert Kraft. Among those who have gathered in Thailand for the martial arts competition are Penn—as in Pendragon—but of the House of Kay (Eoin O'Brien), his girlfriend Jenna (Kelly B. Jones), and Lucas of the House of Lancelot (Alex Winters), who seems to have had an earlier fling with Jenna. There is also a descendant of Tristan, here a woman named Georgina (Tanja Keller), in love with Mordred who returns her affections and agrees to help in the fight against his mother. The only way to defeat Morgana is to melt down the Grail and pull Excalibur from the molten metal—a feat only a true descendant of Arthur can accomplish. Armed with the sword, that true descendant can defeat Morgana, who has been busily creating an army of automatons to do her bidding—'I can use some muscle,' she allows. After several false tries, the previously skeptical Penn rises to the occasion and pulls the reconstituted Excalibur from the molten gold, because, he says, 'I'm not only a knight. I'm a Marine!'

But the attack on Morgana backfires. Rather than being killed by Excalibur, she swallows it and grows into a fifty-foot tall, fire-breathing menace who starts

to lay waste to Bangkok. The Giant Morgana, who now wears a stereotypical Chinese geisha masque and a leather pants suit, channels the title characters in both Nathan Juran's 1958 *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman*[46] and any film in the *Godzilla* franchise.[47] Morgana is, of course, soon defeated, and once again banished for eternity—the film content to introduce and then just as quickly to jettison its racist characterization of its villain. Mordred is also mortally wounded, though he dies with a modicum of peace even though he knows he is going to hell, because, in order to do so, he must have regained his soul.

The direct-to-video *King Arthur* is replete with elements of the Arthuriad: the final battle for Camelot, Excalibur and the Holy Grail, the Arthur-Guinevere-Lancelot love triangle, Mordred's incestuous conception, Morgana's desire for revenge, a smattering of Knights of the Round Table or their present-day descendants, a nod to the Tristan story, a reaffirmation of the myth of the promised Arthurian return in a time of future peril. And Cohn's film retells his version of the Arthuriad using several cinematic genres: the martial arts film, the hell really hath no fury like a woman scorned film (the title character in *50 Foot Woman* seeks revenge on her cheating husband), and the *Godzilla* franchise which first appeared in Japan in 1954 as a warning against impending nuclear apocalypse, and which has gone on to be retold more than three dozen times in films that seem to have less and less to do with the threat of atomic annihilation.

TRANSFORMERS: THE LAST KNIGHT

Among other unexpected recent visitors to King Arthur's court have been some alien Transformers and two superheroes. Michael Bay's 2017 fifth installment in the *Transformers* franchise, *Transformers: The Last Knight*[48] opens in late fifth-century Britain with Merlin (Stanley Tucci) enlisting the aid of a group of alien Transformers to turn the tide in Arthur's battle with the Saxons. Fast forward to the present where Oxford Professor Viviane Wembly (Laura Haddock), the last of Merlin's bloodline, holds the key to the whereabouts of his staff which can be used to save the world from an invasion of additional unfriendly Transformers. Aiding Vivianne are a cast of characters who reappear from the earlier films in the franchise, including Sir Edmund Burton (Anthony Hopkins), the last living member of the Order of Witwiccans, a group of important historical figures who have aided the Transformers in the past in hiding their identities for fear that they would be destroyed by humans or by other hostile aliens. As an example of either cinema Arthuriana or a part of the *Transformers* franchise, *The Last Knight* is not notable, indeed it was universally panned, not without reason, by critics and fans alike, despite an all-star cast that also included Mark Wahlberg, John Goodman, Steve Buscemi, John Tuturro, and Josh Duhamel. Cinema Arthuriana has certainly proven more than adaptable to multiple genres, but

the mix of the Arthuriad and the multi-leveled story of the Transformers here alas proves unsuccessful.

AQUAMAN

Like King Arthur, Aquaman has had a complicated legacy. The DC Comics' hero first appeared in 1941 in a supporting role, but his character subsequently came into its own when Aquaman became a founding member of the American Justice League, and a reboot of the character in the 1990s firmly grounded him in the world of King Arthur. As his character developed, his appearance also changed from wimpy kid to wonder boy to buff, often overly so, superhero—sometimes blonde, sometimes not; sometimes bearded, sometimes not. Originally, his foes were Nazi submarine commanders and other Axis villains. Eventually, his identity was fleshed (fished?) out: he is Arthur Curry, son of a lighthouse keeper and of an outcast queen of the underwater kingdom of Atlantis. By either his mother or his father, he has a troubled, or trouble-some, half-brother, with whom he will eventually come into conflict. His super powers include an ability to communicate with marine life and to live both on land and under water. Aquaman has appeared not only in print, but also on film and on television. He was also the butt of a long-running joke on the 2004–2011 HBO comedy series *Entourage*, when in seasons 2 and 3 Adrian Grenier's Vince Chase was cast in an Aquaman film directed by *Titanic*'s James Cameron, but not in its sequel.[49]

In James Wan's 2018 film *Aquaman*,[50] Jason Momoa plays the title character. Momoa began his career in 1998 as a swimwear model. After repeated trips to the gym, and to the tattoo parlor, Momoa's career blossomed, and he was cast in (literally) meatier roles, including that of the title character in the 2011 remake of *Conan the Barbarian* directed by Marcus Nispel and, perhaps more famously, that of Khal Drogo in the HBO series *Game of Thrones*.

Aquaman opens in Maine in 1985 as lighthouse keeper Thomas Curry (Temuera Morrison) rescues a woman who has washed ashore. She is Atlanna (Nicole Kidman, who adds much needed gravitas to the film), the princess of Atlantis, fleeing a forced marriage. Thomas and Atlanna fall in love, and have a son, Arthur. Atlanna is kidnapped and returned to Atlantis where she is executed for having a half-breed son by being sent into the ominous sounding Trench. Flash forward to the present when that half-breed son Arthur, who has been secretly trained in Atlantian ways by Nuidis Vulko (Willem Dafoe), single handedly defeats a group of pirates attempting to hijack a Russian nuclear submarine. When their leader, Jesse Kane (Michael Beach), is killed during the unsuccessful hijack attempt, his son David (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II) vows revenge.

David becomes a mercenary in the employ of Orm (Patrick Wilson), Arthur's younger half-brother and the King of Atlantis. Orm has David

engineer an attack on Atlantis as a pretext for declaring war on the surface world. To succeed in such a war, Orm must unite the kingdoms under the sea. His attempts are thwarted by Princess Mera (Amber Heard), originally Orm's fiancée, who soon falls in love with Arthur. Arthur, Mera, and Vulko team up to find the long lost Trident of Atlan, which can only be secured by the rightful King of Atlantis.

The Trident is, of course, not easily found, and the search for the mythical talisman drives the plot of the middle of film which sees David Kane return as Black Manta—Aquaman's super villain counterpart[51]—to hinder Arthur and Mera's quest. After multiple adventures that include a trek across the Sahara and a visit to Sicily, Arthur and Mera end up beneath the surface of the ocean, defeating a legion of amphibious creatures in the Trench, and facing down the Karathen, a gigantic monster who guards the trident. Arthur claims the Trident and astride a seahorse leads an army of sea creatures to defeat Orm. Along the way, he discovers his mother is still alive. Atlanna returns to Thomas. Orm is imprisoned, and Arthur agrees to become King of Atlantis.

As superhero comics films go, *Aquaman* is nothing spectacular. The plot wastes no time establishing a complicated backstory for its title character. At times, the film's tone is serious; at times, tongue in cheek. There are some throwaway lines of dialogue that are potentially funny, but both verbal and visual gags fall flat more often than not. In one scene early in the film, when Arthur is confronted by three burly bikers in a bar, we expect the usual brawl that destroys the bar, but the three simply want to pose with Arthur for a selfie—which they incongruously snap using a shocking pink iPhone.

Arthur comes off as more than a bit thick; Mera is the brains of the duo. Costumes hypersexualize the characters. Momoa's Aquaman seems to own no shirts; until he retrieves the Trident, he only wears waterproof form-fitting vests to complement his skin-tight waterproof jeans. Heard's outfits as Princess Mera are a study in aqua colored spandex.The pace of the film, which is too long by about half an hour, drags on and on until Arthur retrieves the Trident. Then the action becomes a riot of CGI on overdrive as Arthur suddenly becomes Aquaman in a green and gold leaf costume, designed to leave nothing to the imagination, riding his seahorse and wielding the Trident to defeat a dizzying array of underwater enemies—so dizzying is that array that it is at times difficult to figure out just who is fighting whom—or what.

The film's Arthurian elements are established by the title character's first name, and by a variation on the traditionally problematic—or unusual—Arthurian parentage: for Ygraine and Uther read Atlanna and Thomas. Aquaman, like Perceval in multiple versions of the Arthurian legend, initially defeats a knight in red armor—here, of course, a sea knight. While King Arthur's last battle is usually with his illegitimate son Mordred, Aquaman's last battle with his half-brother Orm is a close enough parallel. Mera is part

Guinevere, part good Morgan le Fay. Vulko serves as Aquaman's Merlin, and the Trident is, of course, the film's Excalibur. Malory has it that 'Whoso pulleth oute this swerd of this stone and anvyld is rightwys kynge borne of all Englond.'[52] In *Aquaman,* the ability to retrieve the Trident similarly guarantees who is 'rightwys kynge borne' of all Atlantis. Aquaman's interrogation by the Karathen at times recalls that of Arthur and his knights by Mighty Tim in Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones's brilliantly madcap 1975 film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. In Boorman's 1981 film *Excalibur*, Arthur learns that the secret of the Grail is that the land and the king are one. In *Aquaman*, the title character declares that the land and the sea are one.

But *Aquaman* wears its eco-politics lightly. The counterattack that Orm launches against the surface deposits back on land all the garbage that has been dumped into the world's oceans to pollute them; however, there is no real green agenda to the film, hidden or otherwise. The slow pace of the film's middle is partially compensated for by the dizzying pace of its ending. While Orm is imprisoned at the end of the film in a room with a view (a running joke from earlier in the film), we know enough about the fate of surviving film villains that he will inevitably return, especially since, as the final credits roll, a snarling, and wounded, David Kane reappears still vowing to kill Aquaman for the death of his father—thereby laying the groundwork for a sequel—one has already been greenlit[53]—if not for a cinematic franchise.

HELLBOY

The 2019 film *Hellboy*[54] is a reboot of the *Hellboy* film series with a different director, screenwriter, and star. The first two films, the 2004 *Hellboy* and the 2008 *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*, were written and directed by Guillermo del Toro and starred Ron Perlman as the eponymous hero.[55] The third film, originally titled *Hellboy: Rise of the Blood Queen*, was directed by Neil Marshall from a screenplay by Andrew Crosby and starred David Harbour in the title role. All three films are based on continuing comic book series by Mike Mignola that began in 1993, one about Hellboy and one about the B.P.R.D. (the Bureau of Paranormal Research and Defense), an arm of the FBI that has operated covertly since the last years of the Second World War under the guidance of Professor Trevor Bruttenholm, known as 'Broom,' who previously served as an advisor to FDR on paranormal matters. The most recent film has been the least well-received of the three by critics and fans alike.

Hellboy himself is a hybrid character—part Gothic figure, part superhero. He is specifically designed to 'upset traditional representational clichés. . . . [He] unites the traditional performance of white working class American masculinity with a radically non-Caucasian skin colour and a traditional Japanese hair style.'[56] Hellboy's backstory is complicated and filled with a variety of characters, human and not. Indeed, Mignola has created for Hellboy

a surrounding world as complicated as that in Tolkien's Middle Earth.[57] As Scott Bukatman notes,

> Hellboy and its spin-off series now form a deeply intertextual enterprise that incorporates a broad range of literary, visual, and cinematic influences, including classic horror fiction, war-films, folklore, monster movies, other comics, and Mexican *luchadores* . . . To fully appreciate . . . [Mignola's] accomplishment is to understand the intermedial influences of Albrecht Dürer and Manly Wade Wellman, Jack Kirby and Charles Dickens, and Robert E. Howard and Jean Cocteau . . . Stories are often structured around extensive quotations from Poe, Shakespeare, and Milton.[58]

And Hellboy's pedigree makes him more than a little problematic as a straight up hero: 'On December 23, 1944, a small red demon-like creature appeared in a ball of flames at a ruined church in East Bromwich, England . . . The creature's appearance coincided exactly with the conclusion of [a revitalized] Rasputin's Ragna Rok project, a Nazi-sponsored attempt to release the Ogdru Jahad from their prison in the Abyss.'[59] The Ogdru Jahad are seven gigantic creatures whose release will bring about the Apocalypse.[60] Hellboy has a key role, it is prophesized, to play in that Apocalypse. His true name is 'Anung Un Rama, World Destroyer [who] was born to loose the Dragon [of the Apocalypse by waking his] "devil heart" and . . . [donning] "his crown of fire" [so that his coming of age would be] the death knell of man.'[61] Understandably, Hellboy's promised link to the Apocalypse does not always earn him friends. While Broom may have been moved by compassion to adopt and rear him as his own son, others look less kindly on him, and seek to confine, if not kill, him—in all three *Hellboy* films and in a number of print versions of his story.

The 2019 Marshall film builds on this backstory for Hellboy but adds to it a version of the Arthuriad—at times familiar, at times new.[62] The film opens in 517 at the climactic battle of Pindle Hill between King Arthur (Mark Stanley) and Merlin (Brian Gleeson) and Vivian Nimue, the Blood Queen (Milla Jovovich), who fails to attain world dominance for her array of non-human minions because she is betrayed by one of them, the witch Ganeida (Penelope Mitchell). Using Excalibur, Arthur dismembers Nimue and has her body parts scattered across England in locked chests. Fast forward to present-day Tijuana, where Hellboy is searching for missing B.P.R.D. agent Esteban Ruiz (Mario de la Rosa). Ruiz, unfortunately, has been turned into a vampire in the form of the Mayan Bat God Camazoltz. Hellboy and Ruiz wrestle, and Hellboy ends up killing him, impaling him on the turnbuckle—in his last breath Ruiz, now back in human form, warns Hellboy that 'the end is coming.'

Hellboy returns to B.P.R.D. headquarters in Colorado, but he is soon dispatched to England to help the Osiris Club, the B.P.R.D.'s British counterpart, hunt down and kill three giants, though they intend to kill Hellboy in the process to stave off the impending Apocalypse. At the Osiris

Club, Hellboy is shown the story of his birth by the resident seer, Lady Hatton (Sophie Okonedo), in a condensed retelling of that story from the 2004 film. But Lady Hatton's vision has an indirect Arthurian link, not explored in either the 2004 or the 2008 del Toro film. Given his demonic birth, Hellboy's origins are readily analogous to those of Merlin, who, in Geoffrey of Monmouth and elsewhere, is the son of a nocturnal phantom and an incubus demon.[63]

But Marshall's film wishes to establish a more elaborate Arthurian connection for Hellboy. In 1574, Arthur's last living descendant married a demon by whom she had a son, Hellboy, who is, therefore, the final heir to the Arthurian royal lineage. His wielding of Excalibur, once he assumes his true identity as Anung Un Rama, will usher in the Apocalypse. Mankind will be destroyed, and the forces of darkness and evil will take over a world ruled by him and his Blood Queen, Nimue—or so she hopes. But Hellboy has always made it a point to reject his destiny. He may live in a Manichean world, but he is not without freewill. In del Toro's 2004 film, FBI agent John Myers (Rupert Evans)—cast as a kind of 'young knight who is inexperienced, but pure of heart'—stands by Hellboy after Broom's death to help him become 'a man' rather than a monster.[64] In Marshall's film, Nimue briefly succeeds in unleashing the forces of evil by returning to Pindle Hill and uttering a variation on Merlin's Charm of Making from John Boorman's 1981 film *Excalibur*, but, in a final battle in London's St. Paul's Cathedral, Hellboy rejects his destiny, beheads Nimue with Excalibur (and a bad pun), and sends her head into Hell in such a way that points to a possible sequel, except for the fact that the Marshall film was such a critical and financial failure that no sequels are likely to be forthcoming.

Marshall's choice of Nimue as the Arthurian nemesis is cinematically unusual—the role more often falls to Morgan Le Fay or to Morgana. Nimue has, however, a dual pedigree in the Arthuriad. She 'first serves as a devourer and then as a restorer of Arthurian males. Like her sister-avatar [Morgan], she is called the Lady of the Lake.'[65] In his film, Marshall expands cinema Arthuriana further into several genres—horror film, superhero adventure, apocalyptic nightmare—but alas without much success. The two del Toro film's had a glibness and ironic tone to them that is missing here. Indeed, David Harbour admitted to rejecting Perlman's characterization of the character in favor of a grittier and more emotionally explosive Hellboy,[66] a decision the film's financial backers may have come to regret.

THE KID WHO WOULD BE KING

Joe Cornish's 2019 film *The Kid Who Would Be King*[67] reflects two hallmarks of Arthurian medievalism, the so-called 'Breton hope' dating from the early twelfth century, which promised that Arthur would return in Britain's times of need, and continuing efforts to retell or to reinvent any number of

established Arthurian texts and tales for younger audiences, though Cormish's film aims to be more than simply another example of Arthurian juvenilia.[68] The director's earlier film *Attack the Block*[69] had slightly older teens fending off invading aliens from outer space. *The Kid Who Would Be King* repeats the same basic narrative thread, but the aliens are zombies buried with Morgana in her subterranean lair, and Earth's defenders, here recast as Knights of the Round Table, are younger than their counterparts in *Attack the Block*.

Cornish's film opens with an animated sequence retelling the medieval tale of Arthur from his pulling of the sword from the stone to his imprisoning of Morgana in a tangled subterranean lair. Arthur's success is due to his ability to turn enemies into allies, and Arthur promises to return should England find itself home in the future to a fractured and leaderless society.

The film then shifts to the present to tell the story of twelve-year old Alexander (Alex) Elliot (Louis Ashbourne Serkis), the victim, along with his friend Bedders (Dean Chaumoo), of repeated school bullying at the hands of Lance (Tom Taylor) and Kaye (Rhianna Dorris). In a nice touch, Alex lives on Malory Road. The film's England is clearly more chaotic and unstable than it has been for centuries, and as Alex runs past a bank of newspaper boxes on his way to school, headline after headline proclaims that the situation is just as bad around the globe. Bedders is more readily the object of school bullying than Alex. He is pudgy and East Indian, while Lance is tall, blonde and blue eyed; and Kaye is tall, athletic, black, and female. Bedders sees parallels for his relationship with Alex in cultural reference points appropriate for someone their age: *Star Wars, Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter,* and even *Shrek—The Kid Who Would Be King* attempting to bridge cinematic genres to become an Arthurian buddy film as well.

Our teens are enrolled in the Dungate School, apparently a British public school with no other distinction than its Kentish-related name. Opposite the school sits a building site for the yet-to-be-completed Bastion Estates. Chased by Lance and Kay, Alex seeks refugee amid the site's rubble, only to discover and dislodge the sword in the stone. England now being, we are told, divided, fearful and leaderless, it is high time for an Arthurian return, even if Arthur is here a twelve-year old boy desperate to find his father and to escape bullying from the likes of Lance and Kay. Alex's most prized possession is a book from his father, *The Knights of the Round Table*, attributed to M.A.B. Parker, and inscribed appropriately 'To my once and future king. Dad.' With help from Bedders, and from Google Translate, Alex links the sword to Excalibur, after deciphering the inscription on its handle: 'The Sword of Arthur, Son of Tintagel.'

The drawing of the sword from the stone awakens Morgana (Rebecca Ferguson), and summons Merlin (more properly Merlin Ambrosius Caledonius) who is variously a teenager (the truly remarkable Angus Imrie),

a slightly befuddled old man living backwards (Patrick Stewart, who seems to have come along for the ride just to have some fun), and an owl. To survive, Merlin needs occasional drafts of a magic potion made from beetle juice, beaver urine, and ground animal bones. Coincidentally, they are the same ingredients for the special meal on offer at the local Lickin' Chicken fast food outlet: cherry aide, vanilla ice cream, and chicken nuggets—if nothing else persuades moviegoers to avoid the Cineplex refreshment stand, this joke, repeated twice in the film, should.

Disguised as Merton, a transfer student, the teenage Merlin shows up at Dungate and tells Alex and friends that Morgana has been awakened and that she and her army of zombie knights, the *mortes miles*, will rise up within four days during a solar eclipse and rule a world now dominated by policies and politics that pit 'people like us against people like them.'

Taking a cue from the story of Arthur told in his favorite book, Alex attempts to make allies of his enemies, and sets up a new round table—once the leaves on the drop-down table in Lance's dining room are raised. The four decide to set out, with Merlin in all three of his forms in tow, for Tintagel, to find Alex's long lost father, convinced that he will help them defeat Morgana. In keeping with Arthurian tradition, the four adopt a chivalric code that requires them to honor those whom they love, to refrain from wanton offense, to speak the truth at all times, and to persevere in any enterprise until the very end. The oath that they take to uphold their version of the code is not quite Sir Thomas Malory's Pentecost Oath,[70] but it will eventually serve a similar purpose in *The Kid Who Would Be King* to test the mettle of any would-be knight.

Alex soon discovers that his father was haunted by demons—he was a violent drunkard—and abandoned him, the inscription in his Arthurian book having really been written by his mother (Mary Gough). At first disappointed, Alex rallies his classmates, and thanks to outfits purchased from a local costume shop, Pendragon Replica Weapons—located quite near the King Arthur's Arms Pub and Inn—he leads his knights to Glastonbury Tor where they engage and, they think, defeat Morgana, who is only wounded rather than killed because Alex himself has violated the chivalric code in not honoring his mother by remaining angry with her for deceiving him about his father.

Soon enough the stage is set for a more decisive battle that involves enlisting the help of all the students at Dungate, who come together having been knighted and armed, to battle Morgana and her *mortes miles*. After much give-and-take, Alex beheads Morgana, and victory is declared, though the victory is local and small scale. The larger world is still filled with evil which turns people against each other, but, in a somewhat preachy, Pollyanna-esque finale to a film that is already running more than a bit too long, the older

Merlin rewrites Alex's Arthurian book to include Alex and his friends' victory over Morgana, as the author credit changes to M.A. Caledonius. Merlin then tells Alex and his company that children have an abundance of inherent goodness and nobility and that the future is theirs. 'There is a wise old soul in every child, and a foolish child in every old soul.' Merlin further assures them that 'Excalibur may disappear, but you know what Excalibur stands . . . for. A land is only as good as its leaders, and you will make excellent leaders.'

The Kid Who Would Be King is filled with references to other examples of Arthuriana and to popular culture in general. A mother's gift to her son of an Arthurian book informs Alan Crosland's 1917 silent *Knights of the Square Table*, mentioned earlier in this essay. Merlin's enlisting school children to save the world from a reawakened and vengeful Morgana is the plot of Robert Tinnell's 1995 *Kids of the Round Table*—another film in which the hero is a bullied boy named Alex.[71] Morgana's underworld imprisonment recalls that of Merlin in John Boorman's 1981 *Excalibur*. Boorman's film is also the inspiration for all but one of the scenes in *The Kid Who Would Be King* in which the Lady of the Lake retrieves or returns Excalibur. The scene in Cornish's film, in which Excalibur pops up out of a bathtub, restages a similar scene in David Bourla's 1986 *The Knight Before Christmas* which, unlike *Kid*, also borrows Boorman's Wagnerian soundtrack.[72] The teenage Merlin uses an Arthurian take on the power of the Force from the *Star Wars* franchise to convince adults to do what he wants them to do. Both the younger and older Merlin sport Led Zepplin tee shirts in a nod to Guy Ritchie's 2017 *Legend of the Sword*, the trailer for which featured the band's 1969 song 'Babe I'm Gonna Leave You.' Bedders is dubbed Sir Bedders-vere. Ferguson's Morgana is at first a diminutive harpy worthy of Ray Harryhausen and subsequently something much, much larger which seems to have escaped from *Game of Thrones*. Tintagel and Glastonbury Tor are, of course, meccas for Arthurian tourism.

The politics of *The Kid Who Would Be King* are hardly subtle in light of current economic, political, religious and social upheavals both in Great Britain and across Europe that have fueled intolerance and suspicion and contributed to a rise in nationalism. Although Brexit is never directly mentioned, it too hangs over the film's depiction of an England riven by factionalism and fear, and thus in need of Arthur's promised return. The film's antidote to such factionalism and fear is not especially profound or thought-provoking, but it does contain an unexpected royal echo. The reigning monarch has twice, in her annual Christmas message for 2018 and in a later speech in Norfolk, called upon her subjects to adopt more civility and compromise in their public and private lives:

> 'Every generation faces fresh challenges and opportunities . . . As we look for new answers in the modern age, I for one prefer the tried and tested recipes, like speaking well of each other and respecting different points of view;

> coming together to seek out the common ground; and never losing sight of the bigger picture . . . To me, these approaches are timeless, and I commend them to everyone.'[73]

Cornish's film issues a similar call for civility and compromise, though whether his young heroes will be able to change the course of public discourse any more successfully than Her Majesty the Queen is highly doubtful, especially given the film's more than dismal initial box office receipts which, according to *Variety,* promise a loss of close to $50 million for 20th Century Fox.[74]

THE LAST SHARKNADO: IT'S ABOUT TIME

Within the academy, we have of late been having any number of heady and heated discussions about the history, legacy, and current state of medievalism and medieval studies. While such discussions are welcome, healthy and long overdue, we should not lose sight of the fact that the phenomenon we call medievalism is fueled by its continued ubiquity in popular culture. Thus the medieval continues to pop up in commercials for beer, pizza, auto parts, cell phones, insurance, and financial planning, to name only a few products and services which recently have eagerly embraced the Middle Ages in their advertising and marketing campaigns.

Film and television continue to present their own version of the medieval—admittedly with mixed results—but, recently, as I have just been arguing, the Arthuriad and other versions of 'the medieval' have popped up in a number of cinematic genres where we might not expect them: a spy film, a *Mad Max* film, a *Transformers* film, a superhero film, and a film based on a video game. Television too has given us interesting fictional series on the Vikings and on Alfred the Great, and not so interesting fictional series on Welsh rebels during the reign of Edward II and on the Templars in fourteenth-century France.[75]

All of which brings me to the SYFY channel's 2018 made-for-television film *The Last Sharknado: It's About Time.*[76] The franchise began in 2013 with a made-for-television film, *Sharknado*, that, to everyone's surprise, became an instant cult hit. The original film and its sequels (all directed by Anthony C. Ferrante) combine multiple genres—comedy, disaster, gore-fest, science fiction—and are worthy successors to the B-movies that were made in the 1950s and 1960s.[77] The films are puerile, jejune, gross, badly acted, cheaply made, and improbably plotted. Depending upon a viewer's tolerance for low culture, the films are either hysterically funny, or just plain stupid.

A sharknado is nothing less than a gigantic cyclone that has sucked up hordes of man-eating sharks which are then dumped on land where they threaten to devour the entire population of a city. Thanks to Steven Spielberg's 1975 film *Jaws* (from a 1974 novel by Peter Benchley), sharks as monsters have become part of our cultural fabric[78]—the *Sharknado* franchise just stretches that fabric as far as it can. The hero of the franchise is a bar owner and surfer

named, appropriately, Fin Shepard (Ian Ziering), who in the first film sets out to rescue his estranged wife, April (Tara Reid), their teenage daughter (Aubrey Peeples), and their friends before the sharknado that has hit Los Angeles reaches them. The sequels see Fin and April defending New York and Washington, DC, from subsequent sharknados, until a final sharknado in the fifth film triggers the end of the world. Each sequel introduces additional characters, and features guest appearances from an eclectic group of actors and celebrities, all of whom seem to have come along for the ride for the laughs.

In what is supposed to be the final installment of the franchise, Fin, with help from April and their son Gil (Brendan Petrizzo), travels back in time to undo all the previous sharknados to prevent the apocalypse that ended the world in the franchise's previous film. They begin in the age of dinosaurs in a segment that pays homage to *Jurassic Park*[79]—the *Sharknado* franchise is filled with references and nods to any number of other films and television series. Just when things look bleak and hopeless, April arrives astride a pterodactyl, Fin undoes the first sharknado, and he and his companions fast forward to what they anticipate will be the present, only to find themselves in Camelot. Thanks to Mark Twain, time travel and medievalism have long been connected to each other.

That April astride the pterodactyl is a clone of Daenerys Targaryen astride her dragon from *Game of Thrones* is no accident, and indeed the inhabitants of Camelot mistake the pterodactyl for a dragon, and like one of the dragons in *Thrones*, April's pterodactyl is shot down by an arrow. In Camelot, Fin and company first encounter a bewildered peasant, whom Fin repeatedly calls 'Frodo'—*pace* Professor Tolkien. They also learn that Camelot is under siege by the evil Morgana played by a snarling, over-the-top Alaska Thunderfuck from *RuPaul's Drag Race*, though any student of cinema Arthuriana will recognize her as simply the latest in a long series of snarling, over-the-top film Morganas. Morgana's nemesis is Merlin, here played in one of the film's best in-jokes by the popular physicist Neil deGrasse Tyson.

Morgana wants Excalibur and the throne of Camelot. Merlin is intent upon preventing her, and upon helping Fin, whose son Gil was at one point Merlin's tutor, return to the present. Morgana's plans are interrupted by the appearance of another sharknado, and an armor-clad Fin pulls Excalibur from the stone, though the sword's blade turns into a chain saw, in a nod to Bruce Campbell's Ash in another apocalyptic Arthurian movie, *Army of Darkness*.[80] Fin defeats the sharknado using Excalibur and several catapults, and Morgana goes up in flames screaming 'I'm melting,' just like the Wicked Witch from *The Wizard of Oz*. *The Last Sharknado* is certainly catholic in its nods and references to other films and forms of popular culture. When Fin and company catapult out of Camelot, they land in George Washington's embattled camp where they encounter a surly Alexander Hamilton (played

by popular television economist Ben Stein), who is the butt of any number of jokes referencing the highly successful Broadway musical that bears his name.

In 'The Last Sharknado,' Fin Shepard (Ian Zierung) wields Excalibur to impale a shark as a sharknado hits Camelot: Hic iacet Arthurus, Rex quondam Rexque futurus.[81]

In *Travels in Hyperreality*, Umberto Eco notes that we are always messing up the Middle Ages to meet a variety of agendas.[82] The Camelot segment in *The Last Sharknado* is a brilliant example of just that kind of messing up. To a popular culture enthusiast, it is an authentic example of the medieval. It has a castle, a dragon, a group of peasants, an evil Morgana, a wise Merlin, and a brave knight who wields a special, magical sword to save the day. It even furthers its authenticity by referencing such other authentic examples of the medieval as *Game of Thrones* and *Lord of the Rings*, with a nod to *The Wizard of Oz* thrown in for good measure.[83] And it casts as its Merlin and Morgana two real television celebrities, from admittedly opposite ends of the celebrity spectrum: the well-known physicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, who is a ubiquitous television and radio talking head on any number of scientific topics, and the truly outrageous Alaska Thunderfuck, from a reality competition television show that has, for ten seasons, turned the outrageous into Emmy award-winning high camp.[84]

LA SALLE UNIVERSITY

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NOTES

1 Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. P.J.C. Field (Cambridge, Eng.: D.S. Brewer, 2017), p. 928.

2 I first used the phrase 'cinema Arthuriana' as the title of a brief Arthurian filmography published in 1987. See Kevin J. Harty, 'Cinema Arthuriana: A Filmography,' *Quondam et Futurus, A Quarterly for Arthurian Studies* 7 (Spring 1987): 5–8; and 'Addenda' 7 (Summer 1987): 18. Subsequently, the phrase became the main title for two collections of essays by diverse hands on films about the Arthurian legend. See Kevin J. Harty, ed., *Cinema Arthuriana: Essays on Arthurian Film* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1991); and Kevin J. Harty, ed., *Cinema Arthuriana, Twenty Essays* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2002).

3 See Kevin J. Harty, *The Reel Middle Ages: American, Western and Eastern, Middle Eastern and Asian Films About Medieval Europe* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1999). By analogy, the term 'cinema medievalia' has been regularly adopted in a number of discussions of non-Arthurian 'medieval films.'

4 William Langland, *Piers Plowman: A Parallel-Text Edition of the A, B, C and Z Versions in Two Volumes,* ed. A.V.C. Schmidt, 2nd ed. (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2011), v.1, p. 5 (A-text, Prologue line 17).

5 Important studies include the following: Susan Aronstein, *Hollywood Knights: Arthurian Cinema and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); François Amy de la Bretèque, *L'Imaginaire médiéval dans le cinéma occidental* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2004); Andrew B.P. Elliott, *Remaking the Middle Ages: The Methods of Cinema and History in Portraying the Medieval World* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011); Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman, *Cinematic Illuminations: The Middle Ages on Film* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); Nickolas Haydock, *Movie Medievalism: The Imaginary Middle Ages* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008); Andrew James Johnston, and others, eds., *The Medieval Motion Picture: The Politics of Adaptation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Tison Pugh, eds., *Queer Movie Medievalisms* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009); Lynn T. Ramsey and Tison Pugh, eds., *Race, Class, and Gender in 'Medieval' Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and William F. Woods, *The Medieval Filmscape: Reflections of Fear and Desire in a Cinematic Mirror* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2014).

6 Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 56.

Joan of Arc was one of a series of historical Edison kinetoscopes filmed outdoors by Clark which featured elaborate historical costumes; unfortunately, only one of these kinetoscopes, *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots*, survives.

7 Edwin S. Porter, dir., *Parsifal* (Edison Films, 1904). See *Cinema Arthuriana, Twenty Essays*, pp. 7–8, 286–87.

8 Giuseppe de Liguoro, dir., *Il Re Artù e i cavaliere della tavola rotunda* (Milano Films, 1910). See *Cinema Arthuriana, Twenty Essays*, pp. 9, 292.

9 Alan Crosland, dir., *The Knights of the Square Table; or, The Grail* (Edison Films, 1917). See *Cinema Arthuriana, Twenty Essays*, pp. 9–10, 277; and Kevin J. Harty, '*The Knights of the Square Table*: The Boy Scouts and Thomas Edison Make an Arthurian Film,' *Arthuriana* 4.4 (Winter 1994): 313–23.

10 Howard Pyle, *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903).

11 Clarence Brown, dir., *The Light of Faith* (Associated First National Pictures, 1922). See *Cinema Arthuriana, Twenty Essays*, pp. 10, 280. The film is also known as *The Light in the Dark*. Unfortunately, despite the film's at times inspirational message, the screenplay was written by William Dudley Pelley, whose right wing fanatical politics subsequently led him to embrace Nazism in the late 1920s; subsequently, he was convicted of, and jailed for, treason and sedition during the Second World War. Pelley's advocacy of National Socialism was, at times, linked to elements of the Arthurian legend. See Kevin J. Harty, 'William Dudley Pelley, An American Nazi in King Arthur's Court,' *Arthuriana* 26.2 (Summer 2016): 64–85.

12 Malory is often cited as a source, or an inspiration, by screenwriters, but genuine Malorian links, or even echoes, are hard to find in many films claiming to be based on *Le Morte Darthur*. For such unrealized claims about Malory's influence on Arthurian films, see the richly illustrated souvenir program MGM distributed in 1954 when the studio released *The Knights of the Round Table* (New York: Al Greenstone Publishers, 1954); or Harlan Kennedy's 1981 interview with John Boorman about his film *Excalibur*: 'The World of King Arthur According to John Boorman,' *American Film* 6 (March 1981): 30–37. The literary source most often used for Arthurian films remains Mark Twain's 1889 novel, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. See Alan Lupack and Barbara Tepa Lupack, *King Arthur in America* (Cambridge, Eng.: D.S. Brewer, 1999), pp. 57–58; Barbara Tepa Lupack, '*A Connecticut Yankee* at the Movies,' *Arthuriana* 29.2 (Summer 2019): 64–85; and Elizabeth S. Sklar, 'Twain for Teens: Young Yankees in Camelot,' in Kevin J. Harty, ed., *King Arthur on Film: New Essays on Arthurian Cinema* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1999), pp. 97–108.

13 In general, medievalism and neo-medievalism have become increasingly popular fields of scholarly inquiry. See, for instance, Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz, eds., *Medievalism, Key Critical Terms* (Cambridge, Eng.: D.S. Brewer, 2014); and David Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History* (Cambridge, Eng.: D.S. Brewer, 2017).

14 Kevin J. Harty, '"Arthur? Arthur? Arthur?"—Where Exactly Is the Cinematic Arthur to Be Found?' in *New Directions in Arthurian Studies*, ed. Alan Lupack (Cambridge, Eng.: D.S. Brewer, 2002), pp. 134–48.

15 Kevin J. Harty, 'Looking for Arthur in All the Wrong Places: A Note on M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense*,' *Arthuriana* 10.4 (Winter 2000): 57–62.
16 Richard Thorpe, dir., *The Knights of the Round Table* (MGM, 1953); and John Boorman, dir., *Excalibur* (Orion Pictures, 1981).
17 Matthew Vaughn, dir., *Kingsman: The Secret Service* (Marv Films and 20th Century Fox, 2014). The film opened in general release in 2015.
18 Mark Millar and Dave Gibbons, *The Secret Service* (New York: Icon Comics, 2012).
19 See James Sherwood, *Bespoke: The Men's Style of Savile Row* (New York: Rizzoli, 2010), pp. 62-71. Hunstman, No. 11 Savile Row, grew out of an earlier, more limited men's clothing emporium established on New Bond Street forty years earlier. Huntsman would eventually become the largest and most expensive tailor on the Row with a clientele that included royalty from around the globe (including Queen Victoria herself), the landed gentry, old and new money, and stars of stage and screen.
20 J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, eds., *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*, 2nd ed., Norman Davis, ed. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 18 (line 630).
21 See E.C. Walcott Mackenzie, *William of Wykeham and His Colleges* (Winchester: D. Nutt, 1852).
22 See Alan Lupack, *The Oxford Companion to Arthurian Literature and Legend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 317–23, 443–44.
23 See Lupack, *The Oxford Companion,* pp. 45–50. Earlier films based on the myth of Arthur's return, directly or indirectly through a surrogate, include the 1942 Arthur Askey comedy *King Arthur Was a Gentleman* (directed by Marcel Varnel), which might be seen as part of the British film industry's contribution to the national war effort, and Richard Kurti's fairly inept 1994 film *Seaview Knights*. On the latter film, see *Cinema Arthuriana, Twenty Essays* pp. 24, 292–93. On the former, see *Cinema Arthuriana, Twenty Essays* pp. 13–14, 274; and Kevin J. Harty, 'King Arthur Goes to War (Singing, Dancing, and Cracking Jokes): Marcel Varnel's 1942 Film *King Arthur Was a Gentleman*.' *Arthuriana* 14.4 (Winter 2004): 16–25.
24 Matthew Vaughn, dir., *Kingsman: The Golden Circle* (TSG Entertainment and 20th Century Fox, 2017).
25 In a nice touch, Elton John is played by Taran Eggerton, *Kingsman*'s Eggsy, in Dexter Fletcher's 2019 biopic *Rocketman*.
26 The volume of literature discussing the Grail Quest is daunting. Lupack, *The Oxford Companion*, pp. 104-13, offers a succinct summary of the earliest Arthurian connections to the Grail. For fuller discussions, see Dhira B. Mahoney, ed., *The Grail: A Casebook* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000); and Richard Barber, *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).
27 George Miller's four *Mad Max* films are as follows: *Mad Max* (Kennedy Miller Productions, 1979), *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* (Kennedy Miller Productions, 1981); *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (Kennedy Miller Productions, 1985); and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Kennedy Miller Productions, 2015).
28 Ludovico Aristo, *Orlando Furioso: A New Verse Translation*, trans. David Slavitt (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

29 That the earlier films in the *Mad Max* franchise might be less indebted to the Grail quest; see Paul B. Sturtevant, 'A Grail or a Mirage? Searching the Wasteland of *The Road Warrior*,' in *The Holy Grail on Film, Essays on the Cinematic Quest*, ed. Kevin J. Harty (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2015), pp. 173–86.

30 Ernest Cline, *Ready Player One* (New York: Random House, 2011); and Steven Spielberg, dir., *Ready Player One* (Warner Brothers, 2018).

31 Elizabeth S. Sklar and Donald L. Hoffman, eds., *King Arthur in Popular Culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002), p. 6.

32 Susan Aronstein and Jason Thompson, 'Coding the Grail: *Ready Player One*'s Arthurian Mash-Up,' *Arthuriana* 25.4 (Winter 2015): 52 [51–65].

33 For further discussion of the film's failure to engage the Arthuriad as fully as the novel, see Andrew Hibschman, 'Review of *Ready Player One*,' *Arthuriana* 28.4 (Winter 2018): 98–100. Pamela Hutchinson's review of the film—in *Sight & Sound* 28.6 (June 2018): 75–76—is typical in not even mentioning its connection to the Arthuriad.

34 Guy Ritchie, dir., *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword* (Warner Bros., 2017). Some of the more scathing reviews include Joe Morgenstern, 'Morte on Arrival,' *Wall Street Journal* 12 May 2017: A12, and a catty report card from *Women's Wear Daily* on what the actors wore to the film's premiere: '"King Arthur" Brings Night of Shining Stars for Preem,' *Variety* 16 May 2017: 37.

35 The model here may, in part, be Ridley Scott's 2010 film *Robin Hood* (Universal Pictures), in which Russell Crowe's Robin Longstride is a commoner archer impersonating a knight who eventually becomes Robin Hood. The Scott film ends with the central character's first foray into the Greenwood to begin his life as Robin Hood.

36 Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain* [*Historia Regum Britanniae*], ed. Michael D. Reeve, trans. Neil Wright (Woodbridge, Suffolk, Eng.: The Boydell Press, 2007). The film relies especially on Book VI and on the Prophecies (pp. 136–49).

37 Norris J. Lacy, 'Arthurian Film and the Tyranny of Tradition,' *Arthurian Interpretations* 4.1 (Fall 1989): 75–85.

38 *Malory's Le Morte Darthur: Anatomy of a Legend*, vol. 1 (of 3) in *Tracing the Arthurian Tradition* (Princeton: Films for the Humanities, 2002).

39 In Geoffrey (pp. 136–49), because it is built atop a lake, Vortigern's tower keeps falling down. At the bottom of the lake, Merlin finds two dragons. In Ritchie's film, the tower is once again built atop a lake, home to the cephalopodan creatures who ultimately, like the dragons, undermine the tower, and thereby Vortigern's claim to the throne.

40 Law played Watson to Robert Downey, Jr.'s Holmes in both Guy Ritchie, dir., *Sherlock Holmes* (Silver Picture, 2009) and *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (Silver Pictures, 2011).

41 Guy Ritchie, dir., *Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (HandMade Films, 1998).

42 See Malory, p. 46.

43 Had the film been successful, though, Ritchie had hoped for a six-part franchise that presumably would have told something close to the whole story of Arthur. But *Legend of the Sword*'s disastrous box office performance derailed any hope for even one sequel, let alone a multi-film franchise. See Emily Chan, '"It's a disaster": Guy Ritchie's "plan for King Arthur franchise are dead" after the epic flop at the US Box office on its opening weekend,' *Daily Mail* 15 May 2017: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-4508778/Plans-King-Arthur-franchise-dead.html. Accessed 25 June 2019.

44 *Variety* reported that Àstrid Bergès-Frisbey was originally cast to play Guinevere, not Mage. See Justin Kroll, 'Jude Law Circling Villainous Role in Guy Ritchie's King Arthur Film,' *Variety* 14 November 2014: https://variety.com/2014/film/news/jude-law-knights-of-the-round-table-guy-ritchie-1201338474. Accessed 19 June 2019.

45 Jared Cohn, dir., *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table* (Benetone Films, 2017).

46 Nathan Juran, dir., *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* (Allied Artists, 1958).

47 The first film in the *Godzilla* franchise, directed by Ishiro Honda, was released in 1954; the most recent, *Godzilla: King of the* Monsters, directed by Michael Dougherty, in 2019. *Life Magazine* published a special issue on the history of Godzilla in film and on television on 31 May 2019 to coincide with the release of the Dougherty film.

48 Transformers were originally toys introduced in 1984 by Hasbro and Takara Tomy. They are essentially giant alien robots engaged in a continuing extra-terrestrial civil war that has spilled over onto earth. The popularity of the toys led to a worldwide multi-media, multi-billion dollar franchise that now includes video games, television shows, comic books, and films. All five films were distributed by Paramount Pictures and DreamWorks and directed by Michael Bay: *Transformers* (2007), *Revenge of the Fallen* (2009), *Dark of the Moon* (2011), *Age of Extinction* (2014), and *The Last Knight* (2017). The fifth film is the only one with an Arthurian connection, and the only film in the series that was not a huge success at the box office. Peter Travis, in a review for *Rolling Stone*, dubbed *Last Knight* the 'most toxic' film of the year: https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-reviews/transformers-the-last-knight-review-michael-bays-latest-is-2017s-most-toxic-movie-252831/; Accessed 1 July 2019.

49 For a brief overview of Aquaman's history, see Dan Wallace, 'Aquaman: King of the Seven Seas,' *The DC Comics Encyclopedia*, ed. Alastair Dougall (London: Dorling Kindersley Ltd., 2004), pp. 18-19; and Laura Gilbert, ed., *DC Comics: A Visual History*, Updated ed. (New York: DK Publishing, 2014), pp. 99, 104, 113, 123–24, 144, 187, 239, 245, 251, 261, 266, 355, 361. On Aquaman's Arthurian pedigree, see Jason Tondro, *Superheroes of the Round Table* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011), pp. 158–64. In some versions of Aquaman's adventures, he loses his hand which is first replaced by a prosthetic harpoon. Subsequently, that harpoon is replaced by a hand made of enchanted water thanks to the Lady of the Lake,

whose waterbearer Aquaman becomes. See Dan Wallace, 'Lady of the Lake,' *The DC Comics Encyclopedia*, p. 176.

50 James Wan, dir., *Aquaman* (Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2019).

51 See Robert Greenberger, 'Black Manta,' *The DC Comics Encyclopedia*, p. 46; and Gilbert, p. 124. Black Manta battled not only Aquaman, at one point killing his son, but also the Green Arrow.

52 Malory, p. 7.

53 David McNary, '"Aquaman 2" Gets December 2022 Release Date,' *Variety* 27 February 2019: https://variety.com/2019/film/news/aquaman-2-release-date-1203151066/; Accessed 15 June 2019.

54 Neil Marshall, dir., *Hellboy* (Millennium Media, 2019).

55 Guillermo del Toro, dir., *Hellboy* (Columbia Pictures, 2004) and *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (Universal Pictures, 2008). In the introduction to Mignola's *Hellboy: Conqueror Worm* (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2003), del Toro twice mentions that Mignola is 'a genius' (n.p.).

56 Dan Hassler-Forest, *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2012), p. 204.

57 For a reading of the Hellboy films as a rejection of horror in favor of Tolkienesque fantasy with its more hopeful philosophy, see Keith McDonald and Roger Clark, *Guillermo del Toro: Film as Alchemic Art* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 161–62. For a fuller discussion contrasting the philosophical underpinnings of horror and of fantasy, see Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 57–71.

58 Scott Bukatman, *Hellboy's World: Comics and Monsters on the Margins* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), pp. 9–10.

59 Stephen Weiner and others, *Mike Mignola's Hellboy, The Companion* (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2008), p. 54.

60 Weiner, p. 102.

61 Weiner, pp. 61–62. See also Fredrik Strömberg, *The Comics Go To Hell: A Visual History of the Devil in Comics* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2005), pp. 130–31.

62 Interestingly, an early influence on the work of Mike Mignola was Hal Foster, who created the long-running Arthurian comic strip, *Prince Valiant.* See Chris Bishop, *Medievalist Comics and the American Century* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), p. 46.

63 See Peter F. Goodrich, 'Introduction,' in *Merlin, A Casebook*, ed. Peter F. Goodrich and Raymond H. Thompson (2003; rpt. New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 9.

64 McDonald and Clark, pp. 173–174. Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr., argues that Hellboy is a lost child seeking to make the world right again. See 'At the Mountains of Mexico: The Echoes and Intertexts of Lovecraft and Dunsnay,' in *The Supernatural Cinema of Guillermo del Toro, Critical Essays*, ed. John W. Morehead (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2015), p. 35 [22–39].

65 Maureen Fries, 'Female Heroes, Heroines, and Counter-Heroes: Images of Women in the Arthurian Tradition,' in *Arthurian Women*, ed. Thelma S. Fenster (1996: rpt. New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 71 [59–73]. For more details about the Arthurian

elements in the Marshall *Hellboy* film, see Ian Tucker, ed. *Hellboy, The Art of the Motion Picture* (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2019).

66 See Joshua Yehl, 'Hellboy Creator Explains Key Differences Between David Harbour and Ron Pearlman's Performances,' *IGN* 21 December 2018: https://www.ign.com/articles/2018/12/21/hellboy-creator-explains-key-difference-between-david-harbour-and-ron-perlmans-performances; accessed 7 June 2019.

67 Joe Cornish, dir., *The Kid Who Would Be King* (20th Century Fox, 2019).

68 On retellings of the Arthuriad for younger audiences, see Barbara Tepa Lupack, ed., *Adapting the Arthurian Legends for Children: Essays on Arthurian Juvenilia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); and Elly McCausland, *Malory's Magical Book* (Cambridge, Eng.: D.S. Brewer, 2019).

69 Joe Cornish, dir. *Attack the Block* (Optimum Releasing and Film 4, 2011).

70 Malory, p. 97.

71 Robert Tinnell, dir., *Kids of the Round Table* (Malofilm International and Téléfilm Canada, 1995).

72 David Bourla, dir., *The Knight Before Christmas* (Institute of Film, New York University, 1986). The film was broadcast on the A&E Channel on 29 March 1989 as part of the 'A&E Short Stories' series.

73 Ellen Barry, 'Did the Queen Just Weigh In on Brexit?' *New York Times* 25 January 2019: A4.

74 Rebecca Rubin, '"The Kid Who Would Be King" Could Lose $50 Million at Box Office,' *Variety* 29 January 2019: https://variety.com/2019/film/box-office/the-kid-who-would-be-king-box-office-flop-1203119724/; accessed 1 June 2019.

75 Those television series are as follows: *Vikings*, which premiered on the History Channel in 2013 and has run for six seasons; *The Last Kingdom*, which premiered on BBC America and BBC Two in 2015, with subsequent seasons running on BBC Two and Netflix; *The Bastard Executioner*, which premiered on FX in 2015 and was cancelled after one season; and *Knightfall,* which premiered on the History Channel in 2017 and has so far run for two seasons.

76 Anthony C. Ferrante, dir., *The Last Sharknado: It's About Time* (SYFY Films, 2018).

77 The *Sharknado* franchise is as follows: *Sharknado* (2013), *Sharknado 2: The Second One* (2014), *Sharknado 3: Oh Hell No!* (2015), *Sharknado: The 4th Awakens* (2016), *Sharknado 5: Global Swarming* (2017), and *The Last Sharknado: It's About Time* (2018).

78 Steven Spielberg, dir., *Jaws* (Universal Pictures, 1975).

79 The dinosaur theme park film franchise began with Steven Spielberg, dir., *Jurassic Park* (Universal Pictures, 1993).

80 Sam Rami, dir., *Army of Darkness* (Universal Pictures, 1992).

81 Malory, p. 928.

82 Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harvest Books, 1986), p. 68.

83 While those in the academy may view examples of medievalism through the lens of accuracy, those outside the academy do so through the lens of authenticity. If, for example, a film has dragons, knights, castles, damsels in distress and deeds

of derring-do, then it is an authentic medieval film. For a much more thorough and nuanced discussion of this distinction between accuracy and authenticity in medieval film, see the book-length studies by François Amy de la Bretèque and Andrew B.P. Elliott cited in note 5 above.

84 In carrying out the research both for the original Loomises Lecture and for this essay, I am once again indebted to my tireless colleagues, Gerard Regan and Megan Bennis, who staff the Interlibrary Loan Department in La Salle University's Connelly Library. Thanks also to Kenneth W. Kaukola (of the Toronto Kaukolas) for a final edit and proofread of this essay. Earlier versions of some of my comments here appeared on *Medievally Speaking*, an open online forum curated by Professor Richard Utz at Georgia Tech, for whose continued friendship, support, and many kindnesses I am also grateful.