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Multilingualism in the Middle Ages Movie

Abstract: The article discusses multilingualism and the role of foreign languages in the Middle Ages Movie under a diachronic perspective, focusing on several select examples from various national traditions. It shows that until recently, the Middle Ages Movie was far less concerned with authenticity of historical representation and language constellations on screen, with the notable exception of Latin, a language which was, however, placed in a dichotomic relationship to the language of the film-makers and their target auditory as the antiquated and opaque code used by medieval Church and oppressive authorities alike to thwart the democratic and progressive spirit of the simple folk. While contemporary cinema is on the whole more attentive to language issues, multilingualism still plays a subordinate role in the films' plot, never becoming a tool of conflict resolution and intercultural dialogue. Moreover, proficiency in foreign languages is often associated with scheming and deceit.

Although there are numerous studies on multilingualism in the Middle Ages, and certainly many studies dedicated to the Middle Ages Film genre, there is, seemingly, no research on multilingualism in the Middle Ages Movie.[1] This is probably best explained by the fact that both issues – multilingualism in the Middle Ages and multilingualism in the Middle Ages Movie – have basically nothing to do with each other. Multilingualism in the Middle Ages is a subject of historical enquiry into culture and communication, and, as far as the surviving texts are concerned, a philological issue.[2] Those who address it try to comprehend a bygone historical period. Multilingualism in the Middle Ages Movie is, by contrast, a question of Middle Ages reception. Those who deal with it deliver a commentary on self-analysis of modern society.

1 It is quite conspicuous that virtually all research on Middle Ages Movies is either concerned with topics and myths these tackle, or else, memory cultures and construction of history. The language-related dimension of these films is, conversely, hardly ever touched upon.

2 For a strictly philological perspective see Putzo 2011: 3–34; Classen 2016.

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1.

First of all, I'd like to make a few introductory remarks on the Middle Ages Movie. In his influential work, Christian Kiening defines it as "ein Genre, das keines ist" ("a genre that is not a genre"; Kiening 2006a: 3). Indeed, we must consider a large variety of things in order to talk about the "Middle Ages Film" in a generalising manner. As an aesthetic phenomenon, the Middle Ages Films of the 20th century were on the whole shaped by the national contexts in which they originated. The US-American Middle Ages Film was essentially different from its Russian counterpart, the French from the British, the British from the German, and so on. National cinema traditions influenced its aesthetics, and national political outlooks and social conventions informed the respective images of the Middle Ages that were created on screen.

For instance, German Middle Ages Films of the 1930s often focused on historical characters whose stories epitomised the triumph of a pragmatically oriented German folk culture over the ivory-tower Latin scholarly culture. Here, *Paracelsus* (1943) could be cited as a fitting example (cf. Wolnik 2004: 422–434). A production like Sergei Eisenstein's *Aleksander Nevsky* from 1938 can best be interpreted as Russia's threat regarding the outcome of the World War II, with the decisive battle on Lake Peipus as a prophecy for Stalingrad.[3] American Middle Ages Movies from the period between 1930 and 1968 filmed under the censoring regime of the national 'Motion Picture Production Code' championed an image of feudal Middle Ages where – like in *Robin Hood* (1938) – the simple folk, who represent a community of shared democratic values, is unanimously fighting for the preservation of a constitutional monarchy of sorts (cf. Gentry 1986: 282 f.). The aesthetics of those Middle Ages-inspired films cannot be fully appreciated without a concurrent consideration of the aesthetic impact of the Western. Similarly, the Italian Middle Ages Films stood

3 The details concerning most of the films cited below can be found in Christian Kiening's filmographic inventory: Kiening 2006b, 373–445. Kiening's work complements and/or supersedes the prior overviews. For *Aleksander Nevsky* see p. 375. An in-depth analysis of the film, as well as its premises and reception, is offered by Schenk 2004: 288–373.

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under a powerful influence of the visual language of the so-called "sword and sandal movies".

In the Middle Ages Films of the 20th century we therefore observe an anachronism. In retrospect, each nation created its own Middle Ages and, as François Amy de la Bretèque holds it, this helped put forth their own myths of origin (cf. de la Bretèque 1998: 285). Spain picked up on *El Cid*, the Scots rediscovered William Wallace.[4] This could lead both to rivalry and to strategic alliances. In the 1970s, film-makers of the French *Nouvelle Vague* attempted to reclaim for the nation the Matter of Britain, a founding myth that the Americans cinematically occupied (cf. Wodianka 2009: 284–288).

On the other hand, the Cold War also promoted a certain team spirit within medieval Europe, in the face of the common threat from the East. The French-Italian production *I Mongoli* from 1960, with Anita Ekberg as a Mongol bombshell, reaches its climax in its victory of the Alliance over the Mongolian host and its clear message: "As long as the peoples of Europe close their ranks, they [the Mongols] will never come back."[5]

In contrast to earlier productions, the Middle Ages Movies of the 21st century are much more 'medieval'. Here, we observe the internationalisation of the highly commercialised genre characterised by transparent ethics and catchy medieval-fantastical aesthetics. It can be shown that the end of the nationalistically-shaped Middle Ages Film is also accompanied by a change in its linguistic dimension. With that said, I am now embarking on a discussion of my subject proper: language and multilingualism in the Middle Ages Movie. I'd like to point out that my analysis should not be understood as a critique of ideology or a commentary on cultural politics but, rather, as a diachronic phenomenological inquiry. Although I also touch on the ideologies behind the use of multilingualism in the Middle Ages Film, I treat them as a part of a given historical context. In the framework of this paper, multilingualism does not possess an abstract positive value; it is first and foremost a cinematic phenomenon.

4 See Morton 2004 and Meyer 2007: 69–83 on a chauvinist reception of *Braveheart* in Scotland. However, critical research also discerned "crypto-fascist elements in American society" that are reflected in *Braveheart*: "This fabricated Scotland closely echoes contemporary rhetoric." (Niemi 2006: 4).

5 Cf. Kiening 2006b: 417.

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2.

The original language of all Middle Ages Movies is that of the country in which they were produced: English, Russian, French, Italian, or German. For this reason, the language of their main characters, the 'lingua franca' of the narrated world, is mostly identical with that of their primary spectatorship. This holds true for productions from the first two thirds of the 20th century. No films are apparent that are completely produced in a medieval vernacular. Historian Hedwig Röckelein holds that medieval languages are on the whole "als Kommunikationsmittel der Leinwandakteure völlig ungeeignet, jedenfalls dann, wenn man seine Kosten wieder einspielen möchte" ("entirely inadequate as means of onscreen communication, at least if one wishes to turn a profit"; Röckelein 2007: 61).[6] Robert Bresson's *Lancelot du Lac*, a 1974 repatriation of the Matter of Britain, would only make waves and become a sensation among scholars and experts. The anti-illusionist film concept required, among other things, passages from Chrétien de Troyes's text in Old French quoted verbatim by the knights.[7] At the same time, as films produced by Mel Gibson make apparent, the use of languages unknown to the audience is possible even in blockbusters, as long as it is not a tribute to antiquarian sentiments but is predicated on a clear concept of reception aesthetics.

Naturally, the fact that a modern national language cannot serve as the language of medieval film protagonists came, time and again, to the attention of Middle-Ages inspired moviemakers (cf. Osberg & Crow 1999). German productions from the 1930s favoured, for example, a constructed language whose syntax and vocabulary were oriented towards a meta-idiom of the 16th century à la Hans Sachs. Dialectal and obsolete words ("nit" instead of "nicht", "hochgelahrt" for "hochgelehrt") shift the spoken language back to its earlier stages of development; anacolutha and auxiliary ellipses endow the speech with an archaic expressive

6 Röckelein cites *Barbara* (1997), a Danish film, which takes place in the 17th century and where the actors speak "Old Faeroese", as an example of an amateur production with no commercial ambition.

7 Cf. Röckelein 2007: 62; Wodianka 2009: 290–295.

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power.[8] Since that constructed language remained fully understandable for the audience, it produced emotional closeness and antiquarian distance at once. Another strategy was put forth in 1978 by Eric Rohmer, who, in the wake of Bresson, adapted Chrétien de Troyes's twelfth-century novel *Perceval*.[9] While the protagonists spoke in modern French verses, the film was subtitled in the original Old French of Chrétien. Despite the risk of becoming a second-rate adaptation, the film was not a failure, mainly due to its artificial neogothic and anti-illusionist scenery, "die offenbar mittelalterlichen Miniaturen nachgestaltet sein soll" ("which was apparently modelled on medieval miniatures"; Müller 1982: 626).

With regard to the linguistic concepts underlying Middle Ages Films one can so far postulate the following: 1) No film uses a premodern original language as means of communication between the protagonists; 2) Most productions use the contemporary language of their primary audience; 3) Some arthouse films attempt to create a distance between the world onscreen and the spectator through the use of a constructed medievalised language that draws on obsolete vocabulary, syntax, or else, rhymed couplets. At the same time, the distance thus created is not conceived as insurmountable. The alienated language of the protagonists is a part of a discourse on otherness that extends to the entire depicted world.

The fact that language is only rarely used as an instrument of making the spectator aware of alterity can apparently be explained by the somewhat rare ambition of the filmmakers to represent the Middle Ages as a paradigmatic Otherworld. Nearly all productions are characterised by an internal stratification. While the scenic backdrop qualifies it as 'truly medieval' through such codes as 'physical violence' and 'dirt', the Middle Ages Movie itself foregrounds the topical issues of the society for which it was conceived.[10] Therefore, the medieval society represented in the films is marked by a civilisational imbalance which the modern spectator should

8 The same phenomenon can be observed in the contemporaneous (German) novels with a medieval backdrop, for example, in Lily Hohenstein's novel *Wolfram von Eschenbach* (1943). An inquiry into the "medieval" constructed language in the art and literature of that epoch would be desirable.

9 The most up-to-date overview over the research on this widely discussed film is offered by Quast 2006: 319–331; cf. Wodianka 2009: 285–290.

10 Cf. Groebner 2003; Scharff 2007: 73–77.

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interpret as a result of its asynchronical development. For that reason, every film puts forth a stratified image of the Middle Ages, in which some persons or groups appear to be more 'medieval' than others. Some characters hold on to their 'medievalness' and perish after 90 minutes. Some other characters manage to move away from their 'medievalness' and survive. Yet others survive their 'unmedieval' minority status, however through great strain. In that context, languages and language competences play an important role.

3.

The easiest way of marking off social stratification in a Middle Ages Movie by linguistic means is in itself medieval, and consists of using Latin along with the contemporary language. For many centuries, Latin was part of a multilingual constellation that sustained the life of society.[11] Latin alone opened pathways to education, and education alone made possible a career in the higher ranks of the Church and government. It is therefore not a surprise that Middle Ages Movies explore the social significance of Latin by introducing protagonists who speak it. However, out of consideration for the spectators, the use of Latin is restricted in all occurrences to just a few sequences, otherwise one would have to film monastery thrillers and most parts of films about Luther in Latin. In a well-calculated contrast to historical authenticity, Middle Ages Movies practically never show functionaries in key positions, clerks, scholars, physicians, or lawyers speaking Latin. The use of Latin in Middle Ages Films is limited to the Church and its representatives. On one hand, Latin characterises the elevated dignity of the Christian mass. At the same time, it also connotes a self-contained lifeworld which is, in the literary sense, 'incomprehensible' for modern spectators and medieval laymen alike. In Middle Ages Film, ordinary folk and their representatives usually react to this lifeworld with scepticism. While scholars, doctors, and functionaries are nearly always considered a part of modern society and are therefore conceived as speakers of the vernacular, through the use of Latin, Middle Ages Movies assert a premodern divide between the Church and the State – not in the constitutional sense

11 Cf. Langosch 1990: 15–18.

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but, rather, as a separation of two clearly defined and antithetical spheres. While the laymen speak the same language as the audience, Latin functions as a code of an opaque secret society. Latin is the language of liars. Truth speaks the language of the folk.[12]

One early and certainly somewhat primitive example of that antagonism is the already mentioned German film *Paracelsus* from 1943.[13] Right at the outset, it shows a confrontation between a town physician, who is an educated magister of medicine, and an itinerant medical practitioner who speaks the vernacular. Whereas the cultivated physician ministers with old-fashioned methods to the elites, Paracelsus places his expertise at the disposal of simple folk for free. After he had thus attracted the attention of the city magistrate, Paracelsus is invited to the local university for a disputation. He greets the students first, and the scholars, whom he calls "meine Feinde und Widersacher" ("my foes and antagonists"), last. As his adversary insists on Latin as the language of the disputation, Paracelsus remarks: "Wir sind doch hier in Deutschland will mir scheinen, und nit in Babel oder in Rom." ("We are in Germany here if I am not mistaken, and not in Babylon or Rome."). The magister rebukes: "Weißt du nit, daß die Sprache der Gelehrten Lateinisch ist? " ("Don't you know that the language of the educated is Latin?"), to which Paracelsus answers: "Wollt ihr damit sagen, daß ein Deutscher kein Gelehrter sein kann?" ("Do you therefore mean to say that a German cannot be a learned man?"). The magister: "Mag der Bauer mit seinem Vieh auf Deutsch philosophieren – denn das Vieh versteht kein Latein…" ("Let a farmer philosophise with his cattle in German, for the cattle does not know Latin…").[14] On the whole, the film is a perfect illustration of the national-socialist concept of history. For our purposes, however, it suffices to say that Latin does not only stand for reactionary science. Gordon Wolnik demonstrates that the movie "die gesamte vorgeblich volksfremde Geistlichkeit des Mittelalters […] diskreditiert, ohne sie auch nur zu nennen" ("discredits the medieval

12 In *Aleksander Nevsky* (1938), German knights sing a hymn in Latin, while the composer Sergei Prokofiev endows the Russian scenes with a leitmotif that is reminiscent of Russian folk tunes (cf. Schenk 2004: 345).

13 For the discussion below cf. the analysis in Wolnik 2004: 422–433.

14 Quotes in Wolnik 2004: 432.

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clergy, allegedly completely alien to the people, without so much as mentioning them once"; Wolnik 2004: 432 f.). Later productions, especially those from the United States, establish an even more explicit relationship of the Church and Latin as entities that are completely separated from the life of the simple folk.

In *The Sword of Lancelot* (1963), Cornel Wilde offers a somewhat more gracious version of the opposition between everyday vernacular and Latin.[15] In one key episode, described as a "mehrdimensionale[r] Akt der Übertragung" ("pluridimensional act of transmission") by Kiening (2006a: 97), Guinevere, the wife of King Arthur, encounters her secret love, Lancelot, immersed in lecture in the garden. The latter claims to be reading the Odes of Horace in order to get instructed in the art of self-sufficiency. The queen expresses her regret that all literature be written in Latin or Greek and therefore remain inaccessible to her. She would have loved to write an amorous letter to the king! Upon hearing that, Lancelot writes "Amo te" in the sand in Latin and translates it with "I love you", which the queen interprets as the knight's long-awaited confession, and rewards it with a kiss. As in Dante, here lecture is again surpassed by life. Horace's age-old doctrine of self-sufficiency is outdone by the vitality of love, the phrase written in the sand by the cultivated man remains mute and attains its actual meaning only through the lively vernacular.[16] – In the following, I shall briefly discuss two special cases.

In *The Name of the Rose*, the role allotted to Latin, and language in general, is too complex to be thoroughly discussed in the present context.[17] Jean-Jacques Annaud's much-debated and highly controversial adaptation from 1986 leads the spectator into the world, one in which educated men speak a language that he understands, whereas the laymen – if they are not mute like the girl – use the incomprehensible *volgare*. The language spoken in the film by the monks and clergy depends on the respective dubbing. That it certainly cannot be Latin is clear in the passages in which, regardless of the language of translation, one explicitly switches to Latin – as is the case with the librarian Jorge's erotic interpretation of the Song of

15 Cf. Kiening 2006b: 438.

16 A good analysis of transmissions is offered by Kiening 2006a: 97 f.

17 Cf. Koch 2016 as the most recent publication.

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Songs. But how do the international monks actually communicate with each other? Do they converse in English, Italian, Spanish or French, as their names suggest? The cosmopolite European Umberto Eco seems to have invented a language of international intelligentsia, one which logically should be Latin – and yet is not. With this, the linguist transgresses the topical rivalry between the languages. What comes to the fore is, by contrast, a common challenge.

In hardly any other Hollywood production does language stand so much in the focus of attention as in John McTiernan's *The 13th Warrior* from 1999 – a film based on a novel by Michael Crichton from 1970.[18] Right from the outset, when a ship with Northmen arrives at the shore of an anonymous Mediterranean country, the Arab narrator Ibn Fadlan (Antonio Banderas) finds himself in a multilingual setting dominated by an experience of alterity. Rudimentary communication between two cultures that could not have been more different from each other is only possible because both Ibn Fadlan's old companion (played by Omar Sharif) and one of the Northmen speak Latin. The dialogues are restricted to questions and exchange of information and take place in a plausibly primitive Latin. Nevertheless, the spectators would not be able to follow the conversation if Ibn Fadlan's companion was not translating everything into the language of his master. The film presents Latin as a necessary instrument of basic communication between the East and the West (or, more precisely, between Southeast and the North). At the same time, the porous language of the two erudite men suggests that Latin cannot serve as a basis for all future communication.

We shall get back to this issue shortly. For the present, I'd like to emphasise the following points: 1) In many Middle Ages Movies, Latin as the language of the Church is clearly separated from the language of the folk; 2) The anticlericalism of the films is often conveyed through the attribution of Latin to the elites who take advantage of the gullible common Christians to suit their ends; 3) Even in the cases where Latin does not metonymically stand for the Church, it nevertheless represents a life-alienated culture which fails to help people and their human needs; 4) Just in a few

18 In recent times, the film has been discussed more frequently (cf. Aberth 2003: 59 f.; Scharff 2007: 78; Peetz 2007: 302 ff.).

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cases is Latin validated in its historical significance as a means of basic cross-cultural communication. It is never addressed as a fundament for a united Europe.

4.

Insofar as Latin, in Middle Ages Films, became a code for a mostly negatively connoted culture, it also attained the status of a 'secret language', which is in actuality no one's own, and which one only hears when evil is near. By this token, in the movies, Latin is essentially different from all other national languages plausible within the framework of the European Middle Ages. With its specific connotations, it fulfils a function which cannot be performed by any other language. It is not a coincidence that the films are very reserved with regards to the multilingualism in the European Middle Ages that they construct. They ignore, admittedly, the historic fact that "multilinguale Konstellationen sind […] Ausdruck eines wesentlichen, vielleicht des wesentlichsten Bestandteils vormoderner Spracherfahrung" ("multilingual constellations are […] a typical, perhaps even essential, property of the premodern language experience") (Putzo 2011: 24).

Middle Ages Movies have generally little interest in imparting this "premodern language experience" on their spectators. What they show is (not only in the case of Latin) the inseparable unity of language and culture. Languages stand for oppositions. The 'incomprehensible' is the alien just as much as the alien is the 'incomprehensible'.

For a long time, the problem of language competence played no role in Middle Ages Films. This also held true for the films whose plotline allows them to be defined as 'Culture Contact Movies', and by this token, they should actually also be 'Language Contact Movies'. In Sergei Eisenstein's *Aleksander Nevsky* (1938), the Teutonic Knights also speak Russian; in Cecil DeMilles *The Crusades* (1935) – a film promoting "friedliche Verständigung zwischen den Völkern" ("peaceful understanding between different peoples") (Kiening 2006b: 388) – the English spoken by the Muslims is every bit as accent-free as the invaders' language mastered by the English in the film *The Vikings* (1958) or by the Normans and the Frisians in *The War Lord* (1965). By contrast, competence in foreign languages is not displayed by any of those films' protagonists.

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It was in the 1990s only that the subject of language competence surfaced in Middle Ages Films for the first time. In his consequential discussion of Mel Gibson's blockbuster *Braveheart* (1995), Lukas Bleichenbacher shows the role which the language competence of a protagonist could play in a Middle Ages Film (cf. Bleichenbacher 2008: 206 ff.). I consciously use the subjunctive mood here, for this film introduces the issue without further exploring it in a productive way. William Wallace, who heads the rebellion of Scottish nobility and peasants, proves to be a multilingual hero. As he is standing in front of his enemy, the French-born princess Isabelle, conversation is first held in English. In order to give the princess a sign and also to exclude Wallace from the conversation, Isabelle's counsellor Hamilton switches to Latin. To everyone's great surprise, the warrior instantly refutes the charge made against him by the counsellor in Latin, too, and tops it off with a scornful question, inquiring whether the others would rather speak French ("Ou en francais, si vous préférez?"). For a moment, the multilingual skills of the protagonist transform him to a full member of cultivated society. Yet they remain but an unexpected weapon against temporary exclusion. The (Latin!) scheme of the counsellor is fended off, the princess and the audience are cheering. But that's all there is to it. In *Braveheart*, language competence is not conceived as an instrument of mutual understanding of the protagonists. Unlike Bleichenbacher, I therefore would not say that "these code-switches remain eminently realistic because they depict pragmatic motivations typical of real-life multilingual discourse" (Bleichenbacher 2008: 207 f.). As Mel Gibson exemplifies, language and culture competence alone are not enough to settle an archaic conflict.

Initially, I maintained that multilingualism in Middle Ages Films was not only positively implied but also had a positive impact on the course of action. This is, however, not the case in *Braveheart*. In Jerry Bruckheimer's *King Arthur* (2004), in which the Roman-bred Sarmatian Arthur rescues and subsequently marries the Pict Guinevere, the language competence of the future king is likewise not the ultimate reason for the trust of Merlin and the love of the woman. The bicultural Arthur understands the revelations of Wizard Merlin in the language of the Picts, yet he acts foremost as an antagonist against the decadent Rome and unites the British tribes as the king of all Brits. These are grand objectives that cannot be reached by language skills alone. In *King Arthur*, multilingualism has a decorative character.

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The Russian production *Alexander: The Neva Battle* from 2008 offers a further example. Unlike Sergey Eisenstein's monumental film, this contemporary low-budget movie does not deal with the final battle against the Teutonic Knights in 1242.[19] Rather, it depicts the conflicts that accompanied Alexander's rule in the years prior to it. These are conflicts with the rich Boyars of Novgorod, conflicts with the Orthodox Church, conflicts with the exiles, conflicts with friends for the love of a woman, conflicts with the Teutonic Order, and conflicts with the Swedes. Behind nearly all these conflicts there stands one person: a Teutonic Knight whom Alexander (not yet Nevsky) rescues as the former is assailed by Russian robbers in a forest. Only a short soliloquy clearly indicates that the Knight's mother tongue is German. He speaks Russian with his rescuer Alexander from the very first moment, and also with the Boyars of Novgorod, whom he instigates to revolt against the prince. The complot is carried forward by monks who, like all liars, obviously speak Latin. As the complot becomes known, the German Knight must flee and turns to the Swedes, with whom he immediately starts conspiring in Swedish. Once again, multilingualism has no positive connotation here. The multilingual Teutonic Knight is by far the worst character in the film: he repeatedly deceives the man who saved his life. Although the German speaks many languages, he only uses his skill to damage Russia. This seems to be an unambiguous message.

5.

Multilingualism in Middle Ages Movies is, as we may conclude, an issue that has no relevance for the plotline. Although it reproduces central conflicts between the main characters, language competence does not help to resolve them. Languages indicate borders, and these borders are brought into being by conflictual interests that cannot be reconciled. Languages themselves are not represented as barriers that prevent an adoption of a different position. Often, competence in several languages might even be associated with deception, yet never with a hope for conflict resolution.

19 Initially, the film was distributed in Germany under the ambiguous title *Alexander der Kreuzritter* (*Alexander the Crusader*; 2008), which was changed in 2014 to *1240 – Die Schlacht an der Neva* (*1240 – the Battle at the Neva*).

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This could perhaps be explained quite easily. All the characters who speak several languages are already proficient in them. We don't know why the Scot William Wallace speaks Latin and French, or how a Teutonic Knight learned Russian and Swedish. Our judgment on their multilingualism could have been totally different if the spectator was given a chance to witness the process of their language acquisition. My next proposition is, therefore, the following: multilingualism does not, as such, have a positive value in Middle Ages Films. A second language becomes an instrument of conflict resolution only when its acquisition is explicitly addressed.

This is emphatically shown – and this be my last example – in the already mentioned film by John McTiernan, *The 13th Warrior* (1999). At first, a dialogue is only possible because the old companion of the protagonist and an educated Viking both speak Latin. As the Arab Ibn Fadlan sets out with the Northmen, he is on his own. The language barrier separates him from the twelve warriors who scarcely pay him any attention. In the kaleidoscope of the following sequences, we see the Vikings at the fire, talking to each other in their language. In the absence of subtitles, the spectator follows the example of the attentive Ibn Fadlan and understands a couple more words within each sequence. Like in a language manual, expressions become sentences, sentences become messages. As Ibn Fadlan is insulted by one of the Vikings, he is suddenly able to counter the offender in the foreign tongue. This astonishes even the cool Northmen. To the question of where he learned their language, the Arab answers: "I've listened." It is, in a nutshell, the message of this 'Culture Contact Movie'. In order to understand others, one should listen. An acquisition of a foreign language is the key to the gateway of a foreign culture. That the Vikings at first speak a language incomprehensible to all others is by no means "a nice touch of realism", as John Aberth (2003: 60) puts it. This circumstance is of major significance for the later course of action and for the concepts of interculturality which the film builds upon.[20]

20 Surprisingly, the conceptual meaning of the scene has so far hardly ever been analysed. Even Peetz (2007: 303) only remarked that "[Ibn Fadlan] gewinnt die Achtung der Wikinger, indem er sich ihre Sprache aneignet" ("[Ibn Fadlan] wins the respect of the Vikings by learning their language").

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6.

To summarise, nearly all Middle Ages Movies are set in multicultural contexts: Saxons raid Britain under Roman rule, Frenchmen and Brits march to Palestine, Germans and Swedes ride to Russia, Spaniards fight against the Muslims, an Arab becomes a companion of twelve Vikings. These multicultural settings may appear spectacular, and yet they fully correspond to medieval realities. Nevertheless, for over sixty years, Middle Ages Movies had been consistently eclipsing the language issue. The only exception from the outset had been Latin. It stands metonymically for a Church culture that is alien to the people, and therefore bears predominantly negative connotations. It is only from the 1990s on that other languages have started finding their way on screen. While this has repeatedly been described as "realism", the fact that multilingualism is not shown as a regular occurrence stands in well-calculated contrast to historical medieval reality. The Middle Ages that are constructed in these films connect the use of foreign languages with calculated exclusion. Those who master multiple languages can also abuse their skill for evil purposes. Only rarely does language competence become an instrument of conflict resolution.

At the beginning, I said that the treatment of multilingualism in Middle Ages Films reveals more about Middle Ages reception in modern times than about Middle Ages proper. I see this hypothesis to be largely confirmed. The Middle Ages Movie of modernity is essentially predicated on the idea of a culturally backward premodern society in which conflicts around honour and property are solved by violence. Despite differences in details, this medieval image is a common trait of major international productions. Language competence celebrated as an achievement of Humanist grammar schools does not fit in those Middle Ages. As the dark world of the Church suggests, it is foremost an instrument of deception that is deployed on credulous monolingual people. Should it be true that multilingualism in Middle Ages Movies is "realistic", then it is first and foremost "realistic" only so far as the concept of Middle Ages that underlies the films is concerned.

Filmography

Aleksander Nevsky (1938). Dir. Sergej M. Eisenstein & Dmitrij I. Vasiliev. Mosfilm.

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Alexander Nevsky (2008). Dir. Igor Kaljonow. Paragon Movies.

Braveheart (1995). Dir. Mel Gibson. 20th Century Fox.

The Crusades (1935) Dir. Cecil B. DeMille. Paramount.

King Arthur (2004). Dir. Antoine Fuqua. Touchstone Pictures.

Lancelot du Lac (1974). Dir. Robert Bresson. Mara Films.

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