Introduction

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The five essays here published were first given at a conference entitled *The Middle Ages in Contemporary Popular Culture*, conceived by Madeleine Jeay of the McMaster Working Group on the Middle Ages and Renaissance, organised by that group and held at McMaster University in the spring of 1996. The twenty-eight papers given at the conference explored various themes concerning the ways in which the middle ages are represented in contemporary popular culture. Among these were studies of the renewed interest in witchcraft and alchemy; organisations such as the Society for Creative Anachronism and feast-extravaganza Medieval Times, which engage in historical reconstruction; the popular interest in Gregorian chant and other medieval musics; and the "use" of the middle ages in contemporary film and other media. The aim was to give voice to this phenomenon in our culture in a manner that was sympathetic, not judgmental—a manner that took the appropriation of aspects of the middle ages in our popular culture seriously and that tried to theorise this appropriation in order that we can better understand it.

To that end, the papers offered here make a valuable contribution. Linda Schubert explores the use of a particular chant, the *Dies irae* from the Mass for the Dead, in two film scores, Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* and Ken Russell's *The Devils*, using the technique of "parallel illustration" to uncover the relationship between music and film images. She demonstrates how heavily certain scenes in these films rely on the chant to convey meaning and how the filmmakers have mined the chant for its history of association not only with death, but with fear of death, horror, the supernatural, and so on. David Charles Lewis frames twentieth-century European political struggles to create a model of a centre and its margins in terms of the first model of a European "superstate," the Carolingian Empire. Lewis considers how the ideals of the Carolingian and Holy Roman Empires were invoked during the Third Reich, and how once again the middle ages are being mined by the radical right in Europe,

especially with regard to questions of ethnic identity. "The key question facing Europeans," Lewis concludes, "concerns what effect in terms of human values and the quality of life in twenty-first century Europe that the return of socioeconomic and even spiritual parallels with the Merovingian and Carolingian will have." Michael Sharp's interest does not lie in a simple analysis of historical accuracy in the film *Braveheart*, but rather in a rich examination of the constructions of nation and masculine sexuality found therein. Sharp argues that the two are inextricably linked in that the film's constructions of masculine sexuality help distinguish and define the "good" and "evil" nations for the audience: "Within *Braveheart's* rigorously sexual logic, it is finally the proper use of the penis that provides the clearest mark of distinction between England and Scotland." Graham Knight and Jennifer Smith draw a parallel between the Klingon characters in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and medieval warrior culture, arguing that the profile of these characters has shifted since their inception in the 1960's, when they "drew heavily from the immediate historical context of Cold War mythology," to the "location of the alien other" in "a more distant historical past." They propose that the reason for this may lie in "a nostalgia for a world in which people act according to an external ethic that guides conduct in a seemingly uniform and clear fashion." Annette Kreutziger-Herr examines the appropriation of medieval music in both popular and recent art musics, offering in the process a theory that can be applied more generally to the other essays presented here. She suggests that it is through both the deconstructive and reconstructive aspects of postmodernism that we can understand the appropriation of medieval music, the deconstructive aspects being "indeterminacy, fragmentation, dismantling the canon ... the non-identical which leads to unrealistic and non-iconic art and music;" and the reconstructive being "irony, carnevalisation ... hybrids of mixtures of genre which lead to parody, travesty, pastiche." She suggests that the yearning for the middle ages results from a general desire to encounter the other, an other that may represent a time of simplicity, integrity, and substantiality now lost.

It should be clear from this brief synopsis that the papers are not concerned with questions of "authenticity;" that is, whether or not aspects of the middle ages are being represented "accurately." Rather, the focus is on *what* about the middle ages is being appropriated, how this is being effected and why this distant historical period might interest us now. As Kreutziger-Herr puts it "the middle ages have become a kind of treasure trove that can be mined in any way we like."

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