

**NEOMEDIEVALISM IN THE MEDIA**

Essays on Film, Television,  
and Electronic Games

Edited by  
Carol L. Robinson  
and  
Pamela Clements

With a Preface by  
Richard Utz

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The memory of the Middle Ages lingers like the air of a clear, windful day in the collective mind of the West. Beautiful and fresh in the morning, hot and placidly rich at high noon, expectant and menacing in the long afternoon reaching into dusk, reverent and brooding in the evening darkness, this is our medieval day.  
—Norman F. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages* (1991)

*This volume is dedicated to the memory of Leslie J. Workman.*

∞ I ∞  
**Remembering Dismembering:  
 Reading the Violated Body Medievally**  
 Lesley A. Coote

“Do you know what the most frightening thing in the world is? It’s fear. So I did something very simple . . . very simple. When they felt the spike touching their throat and *knew* I was going to kill them, I made them *watch* their own deaths. I made them see their own terror as the spike went in—and if death *has* a face, they saw that, too.” (*Peeping Tom*, 1960)

As the climax of Michael Powell’s masterful examination of scopophilia approaches, serial killer Mark Lewis explains to his naïve girlfriend why he kills whilst filming his victims’ deaths. Afterwards, he turns the camera onto his own face, then spikes himself graphically through the throat, the moment of impact hidden only for a split second by flashing lightbulbs. Why begin a *medievalist* essay on the violated body with an example from a *modern* text? Because Lewis’ explanation, and subsequent death, make powerful statements about subjectivity, agency, and the function of physical violation that can also be seen in the work of medievalist film-makers and of medieval writers.

At its most basic level, graphic physical violence is powerful because it seizes, and holds, the audience’s attention. The gaze is drawn to an action that is shockingly aberrant in its relation to what is considered “acceptable” or “normal” in society as a whole, making this a potentially powerful site of signification for the creative artist.<sup>1</sup> The physical wound forms a *punctum* within the text, visual

<sup>1</sup> Violence inflicted upon the body threatens the audience’s fantasy of immortality. The gory deaths and tearing of the skin that are rational, even beautiful, to the serial killer are horrifying to an audience aware of, and afraid of, its own mortality: “Plans for survival are directed first to our own bodies, for it is the body that is threatened by death. The body is the natural enemy of all survival, and enemy that we can never escape” (Wolfgang 8). The fantasy of inviolability applies not only to the human body, but to the text itself. The violation of the body-as-text alters that

or literary. *Puncta*, according to Roland Barthes, are particular points on a photographic image that add meaning to the image as a whole. This idea has been extended to the filmic text by Patrick Fuery:

The *punctum* is a specific detail, a moment in the image, as opposed to the *studium* which stretches across the entire image. This detail is that which arrests our gaze, makes us re-evaluate the image and our relationship to it. It is also the element in the relationship between image and spectator that forces a *beyondness* to the image. The *punctum* is invested with a dynamic which makes connections (new and old) between the image and other images, and the image and the spectator (21).<sup>2</sup>

No matter how well researched, the film's images are *neo-medievalist*, rather than medievalist images. The film offers its audience the illusion that they can know that which is essentially unknowable, what it was like to live, to *be*, in the European Middle Ages. The medieval exists *beyond* the neomedievalist text, a text that actually hides what it promises to reveal. The filmmaker needs the *punctum*'s specificity and dynamic to engage his/her audience with the medieval, at the same time opening up the possibility of other, related, meanings.

The signifying potential of the *punctum* can be illustrated in a scene from *Andrei Rublev* (1966, 1969, 1971), Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky's film about a fifteenth-century Russian icon painter.<sup>3</sup> In this scene, a group of craftsmen travel through the forest, happily chatting about the work they are about to carry out for the Grand Prince's brother, on his new palace. It will be a better pal-

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body's signification in a way that challenges and disturbs the audience. At the same time the signification of the text-as-body is also disrupted and challenged.

<sup>2</sup> *Studium* is Barthes' term for the general, overall cultural meaning of the image (or of the film), which results in a cultural understanding shared between members of the audience, and between the audience and their society (Fuery 21).

<sup>3</sup> The film was released for the Cannes Film Festival of 1969, where it won the FIPRESCI International Film Critics' Award for its screenplay, prompting a general release in France in that year. It had been completed in 1966, but the Soviet State Committee on Cinema demanded cuts before they would allow official release in the USSR. Eventually the film was released at the end of 1971, with extensive cuts, including a whole battle scene. There are still at least two "official" versions of the film; see Robert Bird, *Andrei Rublev*: 31-36. On the real Rublev, see Mark Le Fanu, *The Cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky*: 34-37; on Tarkovsky's ideologies, see Denise J. Youngblood, "Andrei Rublev: The Medieval Epic as Post-Utopian History," and Andrei Tarkovsky's own work, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*.

ace than that which they have just completed for the Grand Prince, who, they say, was too mean to obtain the best materials for them to work with. The scene is dominated by whiteness; the day is bright, the craftsmen wear white clothing, echoing the white walls of the palace from the previous scene. Suddenly the Grand Prince's henchman, Stepan, and his boyars appear on horseback. First Stepan, then the others, grab one of the craftsmen and cut out their eyes. The men scream and blindly stumble around, trying to locate one another in the darkness.

Tarkovsky understands that there is a direct relationship between the membrane of the eye, the lens of the camera, the celluloid membrane of the film, the metaphysical membrane of the narrative, and the metaphorical lens of history itself. All of these are torn by the action of the boyars in this scene. Through this tear in the film the spiritual, the metaphysical, the ideological, and the supernatural are able to emerge. Tarkovsky manipulates these qualities of dismemberment and mutilation for his own purposes. They illustrate the *studium*, the overall theme of the passion of the Russian peasantry throughout history, exploited and tortured by those with hierarchical power (both social and political) over them. They also signify the body of the artist, the craftsman, the innovator—and the priest—persecuted by generations of communist governments, all carried out under the justification of being "in the interests of the Soviet people." In this and other violations of the body in the film (the crucifixion of a peasant Christ, the choking of the aged patriarch of Vladimir with the gold from his own molten crucifix, the slitting of a boyar's tongue), the hierarchical narratives of the Russian aristocracy within the film are challenged. At the same time, Tarkovsky challenges the political narratives of the Soviet government that still, the film alleges, persecutes the artist, the peasant, and the religious. Such persecution was in the past, is now, and will be, in vain. Power corrupts; indeed, power of its very nature *is* corrupting. State ideologies of the universal good are as illusory as the narratives that uphold them.

The ability to use the signifiatory power of violent wounding can also be seen in medieval literary text. The story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* be-

gins and ends with acts of violent wounding. In the first of these events the beheading of the Green Knight represents the violence inherent in the chivalric code by which the knights of the Round Table, and those of the text's fourteenth-century audience, aspired to live. This, rather than a simple game of "pluck buffet," is the true object of the Knight's challenge:<sup>4</sup>

Gawan griped to his ax, and gederes hit on hyzt,  
 þe kay fot on þe folde he before sett,  
 Let hit down lystly lyst on þe naked,  
 þat þe scharp of þe schalk schyndered þe bones,  
 And schrank þurs þe schyre grece, and schade hit in twynne,  
 þat þe bit of þe broun stel bot on þe grounde.  
 [...]  
 And nawþer faltered ne fel þe freke neuer þe helder,  
 Bot stybly he start forth vpon styf schonkes,  
 And runyschly he rast out, þere as renkkez stoden,  
 Last to his lufly hed, and lyft hit vp sone;  
 And syþen bozez to his blonk, þe brydel he cachchez,  
 Steppez into stelbawe and strydez alofte,  
 and his hede by þe here in his honde haldez;  
 And as sadly þe segge hym in his sade! sette  
 As non vnþap had jym ayled, þaz hedlez now in stedde.<sup>5</sup>

By having the Knight leave still alive, head tucked underneath his arm, the writer refuses to allow the audience to walk away. The wound is not healed; the skin does not close over so that the Round Table's ideological and political narratives may safely continue.<sup>6</sup> The comfort to be derived from these is denied to audiences within and without the text until the end. The violent beheading at the beginning

<sup>4</sup> Pluck-buffet: a form of "play fighting" in which one participant offers an undefended blow to the other, then takes an undefended blow in return.

<sup>5</sup> "Gawain took a grip on his axe, and, lifting it up high, with the left foot advanced, brought it down deftly on the naked flesh, so that the man's own sharp weapon cleaved his bones, and sank through the fair flesh, severing it in two, so that the bright steel blade bit into the ground [...] And yet the man neither staggered at all nor fell as he reached out amongst the people's feet, seized his handsome head, and quickly lifted it up; and then, turning to his horse, caught the bridle, stepped into the stirrup and vaulted up, holding his head by the hair in his hand; and the knight seated himself in his saddle as calmly as if he had suffered no mishap, though he sat there headless now" (Trans. William Raymond Johnston Barron 54-55).

<sup>6</sup> "When we cut open, we affirm only that which is, the vast coiled skin, where slits are not entries [...] but the same surface following its course after a detour in the form of a pocket" (Jean-Francois Lyotard 21, cited by Patrick Fuery 78). As Fuery points out, this may also make the cut and tear "so much more powerful and shocking," to challenge as well as to affirm.

is balanced by the testing and wounding of Gawain at the end, when the Green Knight returns the blow:

He lyftes lystly his lome and let hit down fayre  
 With þe barbe of þe bit bi þe bare nek.  
 þaz he homered heterly, hurt hym no more  
 Bot snyrt hym on þat on syde, þat seuered þe hyde.  
 þe scharp schrank to þe flesche þurs þe schyre grece,  
 þat þe schene blod ouer his schulderes schot to þe erþe.<sup>7</sup>

The poet emphasizes the physicality of the wound, in order to fix attention on what the wounding signifies. This wound is punishment for Gawain's deceit over his keeping of the green girdle, which he kept from the Knight (in his guise of Sir Bertilak) after agreeing to surrender all of his "winnings" in exchange for the proceeds of Sir Bertilak's hunt. The wound, with its associated body fluids, is also a site of resistance to the hegemonic paradigms of Arthurian court society. It endorses the green girdle as symbol of Gawain's unending shame:

'Lo! Lorde,' quoth þe leude, and þe lace hondeled,  
 "þis is þe bende of þe blame I bere in my nek,  
 þis is þe labe and þe losse þat I last haue  
 Of couardise and couetyse þat I haf cast þare.  
 þis is þe token of vntrawþe þat I am tan inne,  
 And I mot nedeþ hit were wyle I may last;  
 For mon may hyden his harme, bot vnþap ne may hit,  
 For þer hit oneþ is tachched twynne wil hit neuer.<sup>8</sup>

The wound ensures that what the Arthurian court believes to be a return to "normality" cannot be the case for the text's audience. An easy, unquestioning return to society's dominant ideologies is denied: *puncta* can operate in conflict with the *studium*.

<sup>7</sup> "Lifting his weapon lightly, he let it down deftly with the edge of the blade just by the naked neck. Though he had struck fiercely, he did him no more injury than to graze him on one side, just breaking the skin. The sharp blade penetrated through the white fat into the flesh, so that the bright blood spured nver his bowed shoulders to the ground" (Barron 154-55).

<sup>8</sup> "'See, my lord,' said the knight, touching the girdle, 'this is the blazon of this guilty scar I bear in my neck, this is the badge of the injury and the harm which I have received because of the cowardice and covetousness to which I there fell prey. This is the token of the perfidy in which I have been detected, and I must needs wear it as long as I may live; for one may conceal one's offence, but cannot undo it, for once it has become fixed it will never leave nne'" (Barron 164-65).

The method of narrative construction that “bookends” a text (cinematic or otherwise) with events of violent wounding and bloodshed has proved extremely useful for filmmakers when representing the Arthurian legend. In *Lancelot du Lac* (1975), French director/auteur Robert Bresson begins his version of *La mort le roi Artu* with shocking scenes of stabbing and decapitation, accompanied by, literally, “rivers” of blood—complete with gushing sounds.<sup>9</sup> The film ends with the self-destruction of the Round Table, as knights again stab and bleed copiously, whilst being shot with arrows by anonymous crossbowmen in the trees. Bresson’s minimalist style saturates objects, gestures, colors, and sounds with meaning: the gushing blood is life itself, flowing out from, and accusing, the suits of full metal armor that turn their wearers into killing machines. This is both the contemporary violence that leads to wars in our own society (the film was planned in the aftermath of World War II, although not produced for financial reasons until 1975), and the chivalric violence of the Round Table and its world. This, then, constitutes a challenge to the chivalric ethos similar to that of the Gawain poet.<sup>10</sup> The challenge in chivalry is made more emphatic by the fact that this is actually a perversion, if a logical one, of the chivalric ideal; the knights have betrayed, and are fighting and killing, one another. They have no ability to cope with an external enemy if they cannot stop fighting amongst themselves, so the final violence, as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is consequential on their society’s own failings. This problem cannot simply be laid at the door of a particular, “perverse” individual; the audience, and the dominant ideologies of its society and its culture, are implicated.

<sup>9</sup> “The king commanded that all the adventures that the companions of the Quest for the Holy Grail had recounted at his court were to be set down in writing; and when he had done this he said, ‘My Lords, look among you and count how many of your companions we have lost on this quest.’ They looked and found there were as many as thirty-two missing; and of all these there was not one who had not died in combat. The king had heard the rumour that Gawain had killed some of them” (James Cable 23).

<sup>10</sup> Bresson puts this criticism into the mouth of the young queen, who upbraids Lancelot for the pride, ferocity, and bloodthirstiness of the knights who turned on one another, accusing them of wanting to possess God: “God is not a trophy to bear home.”

Whilst wishing to represent a narrative of similarly epic scope and chronological space to Sir Thomas Malory’s *Morte Darthur*, John Boorman has represented his “selected highlights” of the *Morte Darthur* in a manner similar to that of Bresson, featuring violent events at beginning and end, with Lancelot being wounded at the turning-point of the film, *Excalibur* (1981). Boorman is expert at taking Malory’s narrative and giving its meaning visual expression. In the case of Lancelot, he has taken Malory’s continuous explanations of Lancelot’s inner struggle with his conscience over the social and religious implications of his adultery with Queen Guinevere, and has translated them into a scene of self-wounding.<sup>11</sup> The trope is derived ultimately from the Book of Genesis, in which Jacob, fleeing from the consequences of his treachery against his father-in-law, meets a man with whom he wrestles, but neither can overcome the other (Genesis 32:22-32. *N.I.V.*, 57-58.).<sup>12</sup> He is told that he has wrestled with God and man, and has overcome, so in consequence he can now go on, with the new name of Israel, to found the Jewish nation. Lancelot’s scene works in reverse; a naked Lancelot wrestles with an armored knight, who thrusts a spear through Lancelot’s thigh. The wound is eroticized: the wound through the thigh, like the self-inflicted wound of Perceval in the *Morte Darthur*, signifies castration, or emasculation (Helen Cooper “Perceval” 344, “Lancelot” 420). Lancelot is overcome and emasculated by his “natural” self, in particular his nature’s desire for Guinevere, which is at odds with his social, chivalric *persona*. The eroticization of the wound affects the whole body, eroticizing Lancelot’s nakedness and making the spear a phallic object. In a metaphorical as well as a physical sense, Lancelot has

<sup>11</sup> In *Lancelot du Lac* and its source text, Lancelot’s wound is received whilst fighting in a tournament, against other knights (Cable 37).

<sup>12</sup> This biblical intertext is appropriate, given Boorman’s use of the Fall motif from Genesis to illustrate Lancelot’s sin with Guinevere in the ensuing scenes. A similar scene occurs in *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), in which trainee-Jedi Luke Skywalker enters a cave and fights an aggressor who turns out to be himself.

“screwed himself”; this is what Malory *means*, although he does not represent it in quite such an efficient and economical way as the filmmaker.<sup>13</sup>

Much of the physical violence in Malory’s *Morte Darthur* is generic. Epic violence is spectacle; it is generalized and excessive in nature. This excess is apparent in the way in which Malory stages his jousts and battle scenes, using a paratactic piling-up of images and action, supported by a rhythmic prose construction and dynamic punctuation (or the lack of it—echoed in *Excalibur* by Boorman’s use of music) (D. Thomas Hanks, Jr. 52-65). Speaking of the repetitive nature of the Hollywood epic, Vivian Sobchack notes that such repetition “serves as a formal recirculation of signs that, when put to the service of teleological “content” such as the linear chronology of historical events, does away with chronology and teleology and institutes a sense not of individually being toward Death, but of socially being in History” (Vivian Sobchack 313).

The well-known “Black Knight” episode in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1974) replicates Malory’s own “epic” style of violence.<sup>14</sup> The Black Knight’s violence in striking a blow through the eyepiece of another knight, who bleeds copiously through the eye-slit of his helmet, and Arthur’s subsequent violence in lopping off the Knight’s limbs, does not apparently, like Malory’s depiction of similar events, have any signification at all. (“Running away, eh? You yellow bastard, come back here and take what’s coming to you. I’ll bite your legs off!”) The same can be said of Sir Lancelot’s attack on the wedding party and guests at Swamp Castle, where the knight arrives in a scene resembling Omar Sharif’s arrival across the sands in *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), then proceeds to kill and wound everyone—armed or not—in sight, for no other reason than that it is, as he says, his “idiom.” Like Bresson, the Pythons use gushing rivers of blood to draw attention to a challenge. They are satirizing and critiquing the excessive nature, the lack of signification, of epic violence, and of its function in contem-

<sup>13</sup> Although the Gawain-poet does: Gawain’s wound is really self-inflicted, for making a faulty moral choice.

<sup>14</sup> Nicola McDonald describes medieval romances as examples of “incendiary fictions” (3).

porary discourses of history and of “information.”<sup>15</sup> Equally gory medieval ballads present something very similar to the “Black Knight” scene: “For Weth-arryngton my harte was woe that ever he slayne shulde be/ For when both his leggis were hewne in two/ yet he knyled and fought on his kny” (Olof Sigfrid, *Arm-gart* 63).<sup>16</sup> In epic, both medieval and modern, literary and cinematic, the hero is validated, redeemed, saved, or all of these, by violence against the person of others. Chivalric honor is gained by the dishonoring of others, and masculinity is displayed, maintained and enhanced by their emasculation.

The eroticisation of wounding fetishizes the instrument that wounds, and feminizes the victim. In *Peeping Tom*, the instrument of wounding is palpably phallic, a spike on the end of a tripod leg, which is raised at a right angle to perform the deed. The killer removes a cap (foreskin) covering the spiked end before it is ready for use. The sexual frisson from committing the act of wounding is transferred to the camera, which thereby becomes a fetish object. The sword in *Excalibur* transfers the masculine power of the phallus from owner to owner. Although it is given by a lady, and guarded by a queen, it is always given to, and used by, a man. Excalibur is associated with nature, with the female, and thus with “otherness.” So is the Green Knight, bewitched by Morgan le Fey, carrying his axe and his holly, with his long hair and his bare legs, and his exchange of kisses with his young guest, using his lady as his ultimate sexual-weapon.

Of the rape of Cornwall’s wife, Ygraine, by Uther Pendragon, which resulted in the conception and birth of Arthur, Malory says: “King Uther lay with Ygraine more than three hours after his [Cornwall’s] death, and begot on her that night Arthur” (Cooper 5). John Boorman has translated this paragraph into a pow-

<sup>15</sup> The Python team singled out Sam Peckinpah’s films for particular emphasis, as in the sketch “Salad Days by Sam Peckinpah,” in which innocuous activities such as a tennis game result in profuse bloodshed and loss of limbs.

<sup>16</sup> This scene is from the traditional ballad *The Hunting of the Cheviot*, concerning a Northumberland squire from a battle fought in 1388. Richard Widdrington is listed among the dead in contemporary records. In this case, the broken body may be challenging the very form in which it is presented. More recent generic examples of “epic” bloodshed can be seen in *King Arthur* (2004) and *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005).

erful visual sequence. The shots alternate (cross-cut) between the rape and the death of Cornwall, Ygraine's husband, which Boorman has brought forward by three hours in order to portray the two events simultaneously.<sup>17</sup> Sound and visuals are edited together so that the heavy beats of the music echo the thrusting movements of Uther's phallus, which becomes a pointed spear, penetrating Cornwall's torso from below. The bloody spike points upwards as the Duke's dying breaths become Uther's orgasmic gasps, and genital body fluids are matched with Cornwall's blood. In film theory, bodily fluid represents that which defies control; this will come back to haunt Uther in the son who will be taken from him, and in his inability to control the violent events that his lust has set in train (Patrick Fuery 80-81). Boorman has not only, with his usual economy and stunning visuals, represented the essence of Malory's text, but has also given visual expression to the medieval idea that the woman is the soft, vulnerable underbelly of her man.<sup>18</sup> To penetrate the woman is to penetrate the man; thus Cornwall is simultaneously raped, victimized, emasculated, and killed by Uther.

This is balanced at the end of Boorman's film by his depiction of the final battle, of which Malory says:

And when Sir Mordred saw King Arthur, he ran unto him with his sword drawn in his hand; and there King Arthur smote Sir Mordred under the shield with a foin of his spear, throughout the body, more than a fathom. And when Sir Mordred felt that he had his death's wound, he thrust himself with the might that he had up to the bur of King Arthur's spear; and right so he smote his father, King Arthur, with his sword holding in his hands, upon the side of the head, that the sword pierced the helmet and the tay of the brain. (Cooper 513)

Unlike the rape of Ygraine, Malory is at pains to depict this scene of wounding and killing in detail. In the *Morte*, Arthur impales Mordred on his spear, who then strikes Arthur with his sword. Boorman has reversed this, making Arthur advance up the shaft of Mordred's spear to thrust his sword point through Mordred's neck

<sup>17</sup> This time difference is important for Malory, as Merlin is able to use it to prove Uther's paternity (Cooper 13).

<sup>18</sup> For example, the penetration of the Miller's wife and daughter in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale* (Larry D. Benson 78-86).

with the sword Excalibur. Both director and writer use this scene of bloody wounding to indicate the metaphorical and literal "bad blood" that links Arthur and his incestuous son. In *La mort le roi Artu* (Bresson's source) Mordred's wound has spiritual significance: "when Arthur wrenched out the lance, a ray of sunlight passed through the wound so clearly that Girflet saw it. The local people said that this had been a sign of Our Lord's anger" (Cable 220). The writer does not say, however, at *what* the Lord is angry. He does then say that Mordred struck Arthur, and Arthur *felt* the sword in his brain. The implication is that the Lord's anger is something that Arthur should *feel*; it is his punishment as well as Mordred's; guilt is shared. The scene in *Excalibur* is staged as an intertextual reference to the Arthur Rackham painting, *How Mordred was Slain by Arthur...*, an apocalyptic image with the setting sun in the background, signalling the end of Camelot's "day." The end of Camelot is brought about not by Lancelot and Guinevere's adultery, but by Arthur's own sins: he is accused by his own blood and that of his son (Karen Cherewatuk 109-26). Both scenes have phallic as-sociations (Arthur's own phallus is the cause of this perversion of his "blood," and Excalibur, which delivers the death wound, is the symbol of the king's phallic power), but Boorman further eroticizes it with dialogue: "come, father, let us embrace." The whole is performed to the same heavy musical beat that accompanied the rape scene.

In the example from *Peeping Tom*, with which this essay began, the serial killer articulates a further, extremely important, issue concerning subjectivity and agency. The victims were made to watch the inflicting of the killer wound upon themselves. The director then forces the audience to watch the killer inflicting the same fate upon himself. The classic "norm" of film narrative is that the camera turns away, or the editor cuts away, from such events, as also frequently happens with the details of sexual intercourse. The viewing subject is permitted to turn away from the consequences of his/her own desire as voyeur. Graphic scenes of physical violation do not allow this. Just as some texts do not allow the audience to regain its ideological, cultural "comfort zone," other texts do not allow the



audience to escape from the consequences of its own scopophilia, its own voyeuristic desire to see the events on the screen—and therefore its responsibility for their occurrence. As Sean Connery's Brother William Baskerville says to the community of monks tormented by a series of horrific murders in *The Name of the Rose* (1986), "You wanted to see the Devil at work." The result, of course, is more prosaic: the librarian did it!<sup>19</sup> The viewing subject becomes an agent of the original action, but is powerless to prevent the actions his/her own desire have set in train. This powerlessness, or loss of agency, is emphasized by being forced to watch, to accept responsibility for, the consequences of that desire. The subject is suspended somewhere between absolute power and impotence. This negotiation of power/desire is what Fuery describes as "the cinematic libidinal economy" (Fuery 74-77). Is it also possible to speak of a libidinal economy of the medieval literary text?

Once again, the Gawain-poet offers a graphic example.<sup>20</sup> When Gawain offers to strike the blow against the Green Knight on King Arthur's behalf, Arthur quietly suggests to Gawain that, if he strikes the blow in the right place, he will not need to fear the return blow. Gawain understands his meaning and strikes off the Knight's head. Instead of continuing with the story, the poet describes how the bloodied head begins to roll around the room: "þe fayre hede fro þe halce hit to þe erþe/ þat fele hit foyned wyth her fete, þer hit forth roled/ þe blod brayd fro þe body, þat blykked on þe grene."<sup>21</sup> The Round Table audience attempts to push away the consequences of its own scopophilic, voyeuristic desire, and finds that it cannot. The reading audience cannot push this away, either, as the poet forces it to watch. In the end, the poem's audience does not see Gawain's open wound, and is able to forget its own agency in an apparently happy ending. This willingness to "forget" what has gone before in the happy acquisition of a green girdle is a re-

<sup>19</sup> The film manipulates the desire for spectacle inherent in scopophilia. Monks and audience just cannot look away.

<sup>20</sup> For the visuality of the Gawain text, see Stanbury 1991.

<sup>21</sup> "The handsome head fell from the neck to the floor, and many spurned it with their feet as it rolled towards them; the blood spurted from the body and glistened on the green garments" (Baron 54-55).

minder to the poet's audience of its own tendency to seek a happy, convenient ending that absolves it from responsibility. The poet denies such an illusion of "closure" to either his hero or his audience.

One of the most well-known representations of the violated, corrupted body is to be found in the *Canterbury Tales*. The death of Arcite in the *Knight's Tale* is described by Geoffrey Chaucer in graphic detail:

"Swelleth the brest of Arcite, and the soore  
Encresseth at his herte moore and moore [...]  
The pipes of his longes gonne to swelle,  
And every lacerte in his brest adoun  
Is shent with venym and corrupcioun.  
Hym gayneth neither, for to gete his lif,  
Vomyt upward, ne downward laxatif.  
Al is tobrosten thilke regioun" (Benson 62, col.1)

Chaucer may be simply engaged in sensationalism, or he may be demonstrating his medical knowledge. Having noted the challenge to social "norms" and hegemonic ideologies by the depiction of wounding and body fluids; however, this passage also suggests that Chaucer's purpose at this point is a subversive one. The opening up and laying bare of Arcite's physical condition creates a *punctum* within the text. Arcite and his erstwhile friend and "brother" Palamon have been engaging in tournament combat over the possession of a woman, Queen Hippolyta's young sister Emelye. The combat has been imposed under the rules of chivalry by Duke Theseus, and each of the two knights has engaged the support of the divine in the form of his own preferred deity. Arcite has won the contest, but has been killed in a staged accident by the god Saturn, as a favour to Palamon's supporter, Venus. What is honorable about this young man's death? How good and honorable is it to die for love or chivalry? Or is it simply just a wasted life? Chaucer presses the point home immediately with an impromptu meditation on the part of his narrator, the Knight (who has seen plenty of fighting for good causes):

His spirit changed hous and wente ther  
As I cam nevere, I kan nat tellen wher.  
Therefore I stynte; I nam no divinstre;

Of soules fynde I nat in this registre,  
 Ne me list thilke opinions to telle  
 Of hem, though that they writen wher they dwelle.  
 Arcite is coold, ther Mars his soule gye! (Benson 62 col.2; 63, col.1)

Not only is the audience's dominant ideology challenged, but audience members are forced to watch the consequences of their desire to see conflict and death. The romance genre itself, inexorably moving towards the final confrontation, is challenged. This is no comfortable ending—simply, as Theseus himself says, the human need to make virtue out of necessity. Chaucer's purpose is to make his audience think. The fact that Chaucer was a contemporary of the Gawain-poet, and of the "pacifist" John Gower, places such questioning within the context of renegotiation of the paradigms of chivalry, which was taking place in fourteenth-century Europe.<sup>22</sup>

No comfortable ending is offered by Boorman or Bresson, either. The former eschews Malory's narrative of the repentance and salvation of Lancelot and Guinevere, in favor of the bloodstained Perceval watching Arthur being taken away by barge to Avalon. As a prophecy from the fourteenth-century Brut chronicle puts it, "his end will be shrouded in mystery" (Brie I, 73-75; qtd. in Lesley A. Coote 101-09). Is he dead? Is he not just *quondam*, but *futurus*—will he come again?<sup>23</sup> The audience may ponder, but no answers are given. Similarly, Bresson ends with total eamage, as the metal suits of armor that were once Arthur and his knights of the Round Table fall, clanking and bloody, into a large heap.

By way of comparison, the opposite of all the preceding examples is demonstrated in Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* (1995). Gibson's epic killing scenes resemble those of Malory in their generic repetitiveness and their lack of signification so, like Malory, he has to make his really significant scenes stand out in

<sup>22</sup> New paradigms of chivalry, related less to violence and more to pacifism and moral virtue, arose in western Europe in the fourteenth century (see John Barnie).

<sup>23</sup> "Yet some men say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but had by the will of Our Lord Jesu into another place; and men say that he shall come again, and he shall win the Holy Cross. Yet I will not say that it shall be so; but rather I would say, here in this world he changed his life. But many men say that there is written upon the tomb this: *Hic iacet Arthurus, rex quondam rexque futurus* [here lies Arthur, the king who was and who will be]" (Cooper 517).

some way.<sup>24</sup> He does this by presenting the audience with two "paired" executions. In the first, William Wallace's clandestine wife, Murron, is tied to a stake, then her throat is cut by an English officer. Although Murron has her back to the camera, the action can be seen as opposed to being simply suggested; the shot is deliberately not cut in time to prevent this. The whole is eroticized by the plot of the film (revolving around the Englishman's right to rape a Scottish bride on her wedding night) and by the fact that Murron's plight results from her attempted rape by an English soldier (who perversely tells her that she looks like his own daughter). As Murron dies, a piece of embroidered cloth falls to the ground. The cloth is eventually picked up by Wallace. In the second execution, Wallace himself is hanged, drawn, and quartered for treason by the English government in a carefully staged performance of bloody wounding and death. Before being tied to a cross-shaped block, Wallace is stretched on ropes into a shape resembling Christ on the cross. He gasps orgasmically as his bowels are torn out, whilst seeing the ghostly image of Murron in the crowd. Instead of "it is finished," he cries "freedom," and as his head is cut off, the same piece of embroidered cloth falls from his hand. It is picked up by Robert the Bruce, who carries it to defeat the English at Bannockburn.

Like Boorman's bloody death scenes, the violence here is eroticized, and the victim in each case is linked closely with the feminine. Murron has already been saved from rape twice, by Wallace's arranging of a secret wedding and by his intervention and killing of her attacker. Thrown back onto her own devices by Wallace's departure from the scene, she is unable to escape her fate a third time—unsupported by the heroic male, her own resources are not enough. Murron represents Scotland, symbolized by the fallen cloth, in need of her hero to rescue her.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> This is also generic: Gibson is making a self-consciously "epic" film.

<sup>25</sup> Prophecies from the reign of Edward I refer to Scotland, or Albania, as female: "Dicitur Albania littera prista conprobat/ A Scotia nat pharaonis regi egypti/ Ut veteres tradunt Scotia nomen habet" [It has been said, ancient writing proves, from Scotia, born of Pharaoh, of the king of Egypt, Albania takes the name Scotia, as the ancients proclaim (Coote 72-73, quoting London, College of Arms MS Arundel XXX, fol. 5r).] In an early scene, the child Murron gives the young Wallace a thistle, which he keeps.

Her open throat challenges the English, and the forces of colonialism and oppression that they represent.<sup>26</sup> It also challenges the audience to think about their own (and their rulers') ideologies concerning internal and external politics, denying any solution for the present.

Wallace's own execution appears similar, but is in fact very different. The spectacular death of a traitor that Wallace suffers should be far bloodier, more horrific and discomforting to the audience than simple throat-cutting, given that he should be hanged until almost dead, his bowels ripped out and burned, then his head cut off, and his body cut into four quarters for display. It seems that Wallace has been feminized and emasculated, as with Boorman's Cornwall, but he has not. There is absolutely no blood: the camera pulls away completely from any knife, axe, or even noose action, concentrating instead on a sustained closeup of Gibson's facial expressions. This is only an impression of emasculation—in fact, none has really occurred. Wallace is not a victim, but a heroic conqueror.<sup>27</sup> The endless skin of the film—a compilation of mere illusions of history and of societal normality—closes over, and the audience escapes both responsibility and challenge. All they really need is a hero—and a classic-epic ending.<sup>28</sup>

Scenes of violence to the body, on whatever type of screen (movie theater, computer monitor, PDA), make a very effective way for the writer/director to create meaning. The audience's attention, having been seized, can be exploited simply to produce sensation, or to confirm and/or challenge culturally and socially sanctioned institutions and ideologies. Although the concept of a "mass audience" would be misplaced in medievalist scholarship, it yet remains true that this option was open to the creative artist in the Middle Ages, as it is today. Richard Howells has recently maintained that we—like they—live in "a visual world," although we may not yet have attained the medieval spectator's level of interpretation of the

<sup>26</sup> There are many similarities with the historical setting (in the American War of Independence) and narrative of *The Patriot* (2000), in which Gibson later starred.

<sup>27</sup> Contrast Wallace with the martyred Jesus, who is also graphically tortured and killed in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).

<sup>28</sup> Another generic feature, subverted by Malory in the case of Arthur, although Lancelot is allowed to become "blessed" after his repentance and subsequent eremitic life.

images with which our culture is saturated (Howells 1-7). Whilst this may be true in the case of image-based media, it is only partially true of our culture as a whole. The need to interpret visual media in the movie theater brings us close to an appreciation of a (mainly) visual culture. Our gazes, however, are informed by multiple literacies deriving not only from the book and the spoken word, but also from the World Wide Web, cyberspace and the cellphone. We read not "medievally," but "neo-medievally." In order to catch glimpses of the Middle Ages beyond the text, we need to realize, to explore, and to utilize, this ability.

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