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The film 'the Visitors' and the French vision on medieval XIIIth century knighthood

Introduction

The French film 'the Visitors' directed by Jean Marie Poiré, was released in cinemas in 1992 and has become a cult reference for popular French cinema.

Set in the 12th century; the duo characters; Godefroy, count of Montmirail and his faithful squire Jacquouille drink a magical potion to go back into the past, however having forgotten one of the ingredients, they travel into the future and find themselves in 1990. The film is still the eighth most seen film in France, with more than 8 million tickets sold. The shift of customs between the two periods lays the groundwork for many comic scenes. Instead of mocking this type of popular film, we can analyse it to fully understand the modern day image of the Middle Ages. The impact of cinema on pop culture and people's understanding of historical periods is greater than the history classes taught at school. As the curator of Berzé fortress in Southern Burgundy I have given guided tours to more than 75000 people in the last 5 years. During this time, I have noticed that the stereotypes and references of this particular film are deeply en-rooted in the French's vision of medieval times.

Also, contrary to what a reductive vision might suppose, it is impossible to say that the film 'The visitors' only diffuses a negative image of the Middle Ages.

This film is the culmination of a long ideological process, which started before the French Revolution. The genius of the dialogist, scriptwriter and director is to have combined, in a single film, opposing representations of the medieval period. The film, and the French vision resulting from it, is the fruit of two opposing ideologies dating from the contemporary era, which combine the stereotypical, coarse and reductive visions of the Middle

Ages. The French vision of knighthood is altered by more than two hundred years of historical propaganda to justify the regime that is in place or to guide the policies of the nineteenth century.

The first vision of the Middle Ages depicted in the film is a negative view of knighthood according to which the Lord is a wicked oppressor. The other approach is more complimentary to the knight, a tough and pious defender of the widow and the orphan.

I Republican Vision of knighthood

The lord in the vision that I will describe as republican is an oppressor, an exploiter with barbaric customs who taxes his serfs, whom shall otherwise be whipped.

1) Knights are bloodthirsty and the cause of anarchy

The film begins with a battle between France and England in the twelfth century. The battle is between cousins who quarrel because of their pride rather than a cause of political differences. The war is permanent. "Feudal anarchy" is even described in school textbooks in the 1960s, Malet-Isaac's book is used to justify the centralization of administration that is brought about after the second world war. It is explained in his textbooks that nothing great or fair can be done without the great political and administrative concentration brought about by the Republic. As it is said in the song of *Raoul de Cambrai*, one of the most popular *gesta* of the twelfth century, the bloodthirsty fighting fuses and vices of pride lead the lords to permanent wars.

But literature is not the exact mirror of the social reality of knighthood. Jean Flori, a french historian specialized in medieval knighthood, explained that- during the entire medieval period people lived a battle every 50 to 70 years. Proportionally, we can say that stability and peace have triumphed over anarchy and war especially looking at the changes of the political regimes in France since the French Revolution.

Raoul de Cambrai being based on historical facts is also a book from which the hero is not someone you want to follow. It is a pedagogical book for knights to help them not fight each other, and work together so as help Christendom. However, the film shows a different interpretation of Middle Ages that opposes historical sources.

The film shows that the leadership of a knight is contested. It also shows that a knight maintains a social system of darkness.

The XIX century and early XIX century school books taught to kids that: “Feudal barons were brutal and mean; some of them weren’t any less brutal than the Huns who come invading the Gaul’ ‘ The lord only lives from stolen goods. He steals the peasant’s homes and attacks the travelers. War, always wars, this is the dream of this tough and brutal man […] his pleasures are barbaric”[1]

According to the republican vision, History is led by Progress. The darkness of medieval feudalism is therefore in the need of the eighteenth century's philosopher’s enlightenment.

2) The knight's domination

1 Quoted by Jacques Heers, *L'histoire assassinée : Les pièges de la mémoire*, éditions de Paris, Paris, 2006.

In France, under the Third Republic, the major stereotype that was still taught to my grand parents generation showed that a lord forced his peasants to beat the water in the lake all night long so as to block the sound of frogs croaking[2], that would otherwise prevent the lord from sleeping. Another common tale explains that when a lord felt cold during the winter, he had his own serfs killed, so that he could place his feet in their still-warm corpses. The dark legend of the Middle Ages was primarily intended to justify the abolition of privileges that began not in fact on August 4, 1789, but began in people's minds about fifty years before the revolution.

In the film, the knight insults his squire and gives him dog-like qualities such as "sly and he knows how to sniff the tracks".

In the school textbooks of my grandparents generation, one could easily be told that 'a serf lives like a hare, always with an ear listening, ready to escape with his spouse at any given moment and always living in fear' or else 'he builds the roads, he helps to construct the castle. God knows if the tyrant abuses anything ! Often the wooden houses are burnt and every year the harvests are destroyed. Reduced to eating herbs and unnoble animals, the unhappy people protest."[3]

Around 1850, in France, the propagandists diffuse various works with titles that evoke the rights of lords under feudalism. By just reading the title you will understand the republican propaganda behind it : A History of nobility from the beginning of the monarchy to our days when one exposes its prejudices, its brigandages, its crimes; where it is proved that it has been the scourge of liberty, of the reason of human knowledge, the enemy of the people. This book was written by Jean-Marie Dulaure. This republican vision will lay the groundwork for a Marxist vision, which includes the struggles of different social classes and dominance dominated.

The poor have therefore an Avenging spirit, a will of proletarian dictatorship. Jacquouille describes the Count de Montmirail who agreed the revolutionary ideas as a "Holy Man"

The Republican propaganda that strove for a century to soil the decentralized feudal times has had its effect. 150 years later, the most-watched film about the medieval period in France is a film that gives pride of place to the ideology of the domineering lord imposing taxes and physical constraints on the poor. However, this ideology is, in the film, accompanied by a contrary vision.

II Royalist Vision on knighthood

In the nineteenth century a more royalist romantic vision instilled a patriotic drive and showed the beauty of the Middle Ages. The stigmata has been reversed. The jokes on knighthood got appropriated by conservatives. The brute and strong knight became an identity symbol

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2 Intervention the night of the 4 August, deputy LeGuen de Kerengal quoted by Kessel, l*a Nuit du 4 aout*, Eric Jamet éditeur, 2018, pp. 142-143.

3 J. Guiraud, *Histoire partiale, Histoire vraie*, Introduction au ch. XX, réédition Groupe Saint-Rémy, 2002.

A neo-Gothic vision emerged in the years 1720-1730 in England in the furniture and the architecture. Fruit of nationalisms, what is called the *gothic revival* will be exported to France a century later under Charles X and will know its apotheosis under Napoleon III with the famous architect Violet le Duc. The virtues of the virile knight and witch hunter find new defenders in Catholic circles who fully assume the history of France's past.

1) Natural superiority and epicness

The choice of Era's music makes the scene epic. The knight understands that he has arrived in the future while the serf,with whom he has traveled in time, understands nothing. The lord rides very well, he fights well, he prays and motivates the prayer, he finds refuge in the church, he is cunning and avoids asylum.

The chivalric ethic teaches the love of victory and the rejection of defeat. The knight must fight with honor, therefore Goddefroy de Montmirail's motto is "that passes if I weaken". The Burgundian knight who crusaded in the 4th crusade on whom I write my phD thesis, Hugues de Berzé said in one of his songs that "I have never heard of knight who takes glory from defeat therefore I prefer to die under the shield".

The knight takes all the risks for his *descendance*. The inheritance, the transmission, the preservation of values and goods is the high quality of the noble. Men believed in God and the force of evil Also, the knight is valiant. There is respect towards a man's word "we do not molest a woman on my land" the knight is courteous and respects women,. Also, a film does not come from nowhere, here the film is the product of scientific works written sometimes 200 years before the making of the film.

2) The knight as a Christendom defender and witch hunter

The squire is afraid while the knight wants to defend Christendom when they have to face the witches. The peasants are seen as having only non-Catholic cultic practices while the knight defends the Church against the latent paganism of the villages that are engaged in witchcraft.

The witch hunt existed only in the 16th century and early 17th century especially in protestant countries. In the 12th century, the Church fought against wizards or Manicheans like Cathars. The knight who inspired the character Goddeffroy is Jean de Montmirail and he participated in a crusade but never took part to any witch hunt. The knights ethic is to fight against personal sin before fighting anyone else. The rule of the Templars probably written by Bernard de Clairvaux explains that a good Templar first struggles for his own salvation and has to fight his personal sins. Hugues de Berzé in the early 13th century is ashamed that lords are not going to live the pleasure of eternal life because they serve the devil by staying in their castle instead of crusading.

The Witch-hunt has became in the 19th century the illustration of catholicobscurantism in the republican vision but for the conservatives it is an example used to show the strength necessary to fight the modernist heresy promoted by the republic.

Conclusion

The notion of a point of view dear to the Marxist and post-Marxist scholars remains relevant because History is above all the product of its author, of his time. Thanks to its number of views, its ease and its comic aspect, a film has more effect than any scientific work. Scientific studies show that a message that makes you laugh is

more likely to be accepted than raw information. Also, it is known that scientific articles on the Middle Ages are not full of humor. It remains for us academics to reinvent the means of communication of our research.

This analysis helped me to ask myself a question about pop culture :

By illustrating the consequences of years of historical distorsion that has become so exaggerated that it tends to become ridiculous, Is pop culture a new medium of propaganda or a funny way to mock it ?