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Believing and Laughing – Medievalism as Critique of Idealism and of Ideology in Robert Bresson's *Lancelot du lac* and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*

Dina De Rentiis

Besides the thematic area and the time point of production,[1] Robert Bresson's *Lancelot du lac* and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* have something else in common on the level of reception: both films usually make the audience laugh. The analogy seems insignificant at first glance. In the case of Monty Python, laughter is an indicator of quality, since spectators are obviously supposed to laugh, and their reaction meets the intention of the film. In contrast, laughing is generally considered a result of involuntary comical effects in Bresson's film, and therefore a mark of aesthetic imperfection.[2] Indeed, an audience bursting into laughter at the sight of the fight or at love scenes counteracts the film's earnestness, the gloomy *mise en scène*, the sad dialogues, and the visible leading concepts: predestination, repressed desire, guilt, and death drive.[3] Laughter is evidently a positive response to the Monty Python-production, but a negative one to Bresson's film, marking uneasiness, lack of understanding, and ultimately refusal.

However, this audience response is not just a sign that *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* has turned out well, whereas Bresson did not completely succeed in *Lancelot du lac*. In their recent article *The Subversion of Medievalism*, Brian Levy and Lesley Coote compare the two films on the level of thematic treatment and of rhetorical form. The aim of this contribution is to take the comparison farther and show that a focus on the relationship between figuration and response in Bresson's film and in the Terry-Gilliam-collaboration can lead to a better understanding of both films.

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1 Levy, Brian/Coote, Lesley, "The Subversion of Medievalism in *Lancelot du lac* and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*", in: Utz, Richard/Swan, Jesse G. (eds.), *Postmodern Medievalisms*, Woodbridge U.K. 2005, pp. 99-126. See also Michael Wood, "At the Movies", in: *London Review of Books*, 5 June 2008; *The Medieval Review* 2006. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan University Library, Scholarly Publishing Office. <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/baj9928.0608.008> (29 May 2010).

2 Levy/Coote, "The Subversion of Medievalism", in: Utz/Swan (eds.), *Postmodern Medievalisms*, p. 99.

3 Ibid., pp. 99f.

Lancelot du lac

The structure of Bresson's *Lancelot du lac* is clearly circular, built of paired, alternating elements, the last one often doubling and/or mirroring the first (A – B – A – B – A). The first and the last seconds of the film show the same images: a sword fight in a dark forest, carried out by fully armored, faceless knights. Slow, stiff movements make the violence all the more incomprehensible. Each blow could be averted, but is not. In both sequences, silence is interrupted only by highlighted clashes of armaments and short hard groans of pain. Both sequences culminate in a close-up on the death of a knight wearing a helmet, which distinguishes him from the rest. In both sequences, the knight also falls slowly backwards until he lies motionless on the ground. In between the beginning and end of the film, armed fights alternate with secret rendezvous between Lancelot and the queen. All sequences are *in nuce* clashes of opposite opinions or standpoints, but of two contrasting types. With the exception of one dialogue between Lancelot and Mordred in the middle of the film, all scenes between knights either are hand-to-hand combats carried out without speaking, or serve to prepare such combats. In contrast, all exchanges between Lancelot and Guenièvre are carried out verbally, without physical contact. The one exception to this is (again) one scene in the middle of the film, when he begins undressing her, and she resists.

The circular structure of the movie becomes evident in the first sequence, a prologue to the action. A small troop of knights are seen four times, riding in half circle from the left to the right through the same place in a forest. In between these scenes, a climax of inexplicability: two armed skeletons hanging from trees, two unidentifiably coaled corpses amidst the remnants of a burned down building, the sword of a Christian knight knocking a missal and a chalice down from a church altar. There is no hint as to where this is happening, or why. In the church scene, the spectators can only see the back of the knight's horse, and hear the highlighted noise of its hoofs on the church pavement, then the clash of a sword hitting metallic objects, immediately followed by a short choral gasp uttered by invisible people who must be witnessing the sacrilege. Within a few moments, knights moving in circles, killing each other without any visible reason, armed people – probably these knights, but the audience cannot see it or know it – bringing death and destruction upon a land.

At this point, the prologue evokes two frames of reference which are traditionally used by modern audiences to help comprehend human – and especially knightly – actions: legend and prophecy. The second part of the prologue offers a short summary of the events preceding the action shown in the film, as well as a foreshadowing of its outcome. First, scrolling text calls to mind the quest for the Holy Grail, placing the prologue within a context of failure and inanity:

> As soon as they leave the castle, the knights are dispersed, Parsifal disappears, and they shall not see him again. Two years have passed. The knights return to the castle of King Arthur and Queen Guenièvre, decimated and not having found the Grail.

The sequence that follows the running title presents a shift from the paratextual, extradiegetic level to the intradiegetic one. A close-up on a man working in the forest highlights an element that will be absent within the film from now on: plain, simple labor that does not consist in attending to noble people or their horses.[4] After this introductory scene, the first dialogue between two characters, a peasant woman and a child, marks the beginning of the plot and foreshadows its end:[5] The inanity of both is sealed laconically.

> *Old Woman*: He, whose footfalls are heard before he is seen, will die within a year.
>
> *Girl*: Even if it's his horses' footsteps?
>
> *Old Woman*: Even if it's his horses' footsteps.

The prophecy of the peasant is as clear as the Arthurian legend evoked by the scrolling text is well known. But neither explains what the audience has just seen: a knight (by the shape of his sword: a Christian knight) desecrating a Christian altar, a knight standing stiffly while a slowly and awkwardly led sword hits him, and not even attempting to avoid or avert the blow.

To sum up: neither the first sequence of the film nor the legend evoked by the scrolling titles, nor the prophecy spoken in the prologue explain or enforce anything; on the contrary: they ostentatiously put the seal of doom on the beginning of the plot, present a series of inexplicable images and actions, and obstruct all recourse to usual explanations.

Herein lays a specific quality of Bresson's *Lancelot*. Arthurian films, as different as they may be, almost always present images of the Middle Age that are acceptable and understandable on the basis of common knowledge and conventions. Be the characters good, bad or ambivalent, their actions are plausible and the outcome, if ever surprising, still explainable. The mark of the "reel Middle Ages" is an expectable and plausible otherness, and it is very difficult to find an Arthurian film that confronts the audience with something truly unanticipated or incomprehensible. Even an uncommon film like Rohmer's *Perceval*, while denying realism and deliberately turning its back on modernity, fulfills what the audience is led to expect by the verses of Chrétien de Troyes and by the *mise en scène*. In contrast, from beginning to end, Bresson's *Lancelot* presents situations in which not only the characters, but above all the audience cannot see, cannot discern, cannot explain or understand things and actions so strongly emphasized that they cannot be dismissed as unimportant. The film con-

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4 After the prologue, the only kind of labor shown is personal service to the royals or their knights, for example, servants bathing the queen, or valets taking care of horses. When the peasant woman who utters the prophecy in the prologue makes her second appearance, she is shown taking care of Lancelot and helping him into his armor.

5 Let us note in margin the Shakespearian quality of this scene and the dialogue between the peasant and Lancelot after the tournament. Both scenes present humble people prefiguring and commenting the kingly action represented in the drama.

fronts the audience with so many implausible, inexplicable actions and words that it usually generates plain refusal of the movie, or at least uneasiness, and out of that, uncomfortable laughter. At the same time, the visual and acoustic components of the film are so limited and symmetrically arranged through repetition and opposition[6] that its formal language is as transparent as its meaning is obscure.

In fact, formal rigor is a stylistic hallmark of Bresson's work, but the uncompromising combination of transparency and incomprehensibility that characterizes *Lancelot du lac* is unique even within his body of work. For example, *Le procès de Jeanne d'Arc*, also a film dealing with medieval themes, begins just like *Lancelot*, with a prologue followed by explanatory running titles. The first images show only details, no context; in this case the feet of three people walking to the sound of a slowly ringing church bell. The person walking in the middle wears a long black dress, and as the camera slowly pans upward, the viewer sees that it is a nun walking between two unidentifiable people, holding a page of a medieval manuscript in her hands. As at the beginning of *Lancelot*, we cannot see the faces of the actors, only the nun from behind and the hands of the two people accompanying her, gently pushing and leading her. At this point, a female voice begins reciting a text. The audience cannot discern who is speaking. However, the recited words and the scrolling text that immediately follow its recitation are not only clear, but they also explain what we have seen and allow the viewer to fill in the gaps created by the choice of camera shot and frame. In *Le procès de Jeanne d'Arc*, the recitation introduces the theme of the film and gives the audience a brief summary of some important events that precede the first scene of the film. It is followed by a scrolling text, explaining that *Le process de Jeanne d'Arc* is a documentary oeuvre entirely based upon historical sources and that all dialogues have been drawn from original documents and records. The explicability and credibility of what has been seen so far – as lacunose as the images may have been –, and the plausibility of what the spectators shall be seeing after the running titles is thus assured. Moreover, the first scene following the introductory credits is an interrogation of Joan of Arc endowed with perfectly understandable meaning and logic. The biased questions of the inquisitor and Joan's demure answers fully meet what modern audiences expect of a trial following a medieval witch hunt, arousing immediate sympathy for the girl and allowing the spectators to empathize. Throughout the film, through Jeanne's resistance and martyrdom, the film demonstrates the strength that can be gained from a strong belief in religious ideal in times and places in which (religious) ideology rules unquestioned. Thus, in *Le procès de Jeanne d'Arc* and in *Lancelot du lac*, the same stylistic means, formal rigor and Spartan *mise en scène* have contrary consequences. In *Le procès de Jeanne d'Arc*, they enhance the pathos of the scene and lend to a sense of empathy; in *Lancelot*, they make the action unjustifiable and strip the characters of any

6 "For the medievalists, watching a Bresson film like *Lancelot du lac* [...] is instantly, and even more forcefully, to be reminded of the style of medieval rhetoric, as laid down in its essentials in the *Poetria* nova of Geoffrey of Vinsauf." Levy/Coote, "The Subversion of Medievalism", in: Utz /Swan (eds.), *Postmodern Medievalisms*, p. 104.

emotional depth. The question is again: why, and the answer does not lie in Bresson's auctorial style *tout court*, but in the specific function this style has in each film.

In fact, the circular structure of *Lancelot du lac* corresponds to its thematic center: the round table. In the morning after the knights have returned to Camelot, Arthur enters the room that holds the round table with Lancelot and Gauvain. It is not a great hall, as in most Arthurian films, but a small cubicle, narrow and bare of material goods, similar to a monk's cell. While Arthur speaks with his knights, the king walks slowly around the table with them, and at the end of the scene they leave the room through the same door through which they entered it. The exception to this is Mordred, whose opposing standpoint in the dialogue is emphasized by shoeing him enter the room alone, stand opposite to the group, and leave alone. While he walks around the table with his followers, Arthur gives a speech enumerating the knights who are lost or have died, highlighting the loss through anaphoric repetition: "Here sat Ydier, here Clamadieu, here Urien, here Galecin and all the others, here, here and here, whom we shall not see again, here Perceval, there Claudas, and there, there, and there." Arthur refuses to substitute the lost and dead knights with new ones. Reduced to an abstract formula, the content of the king's dialogue with the knights shows that the personification of the knightly and religious ideal is lost perhaps forever. It is not present, no longer present *and* its absence – or: its loss – rules the life and actions of those who are present.

The dialogues between Lancelot and Guenièvre can be reduced to this same formula. Their secret rendezvous are not so much love encounters as verbal conflicts between two people with irreconcilable standpoints. The queen and her knight are seldom shown in one frame. Usually, only one of them is shown at a time, an when they are shown together, they are usually not facing each other but sitting side by side, gazing into the same direction – most often towards the left side of the frame, which is conventionally the side of "past things". When Lancelot and Guenièvre speak about their love, it is almost always in the form of negation. As she demands of him, "I can't wait any longer, say it, that word", he does say "I love you". But he has taken off her ring and the reason why he has come to the secret rendez-vous is that he wants to be released from his commitment to her. He wants her consent to the end of their love. Guenièvre refuses.

Lancelot believes that renouncing their love is necessary to attain his goal of bringing the Holy Grail to Arthur's court. In other words: He pledges his life and actions to an object which for him embodies a religious and knightly ideal, an ideal that he wants to make real. The queen retorts, "It is not the grail you want, it is God. But God is not an object one brings back home." Guenièvre criticizes Lancelot sharply for wanting to materialize his ideal. In her own idealism, she is even more radical than he is. Her actions and life are entirely ruled by an ideal love, something thich, up to the point when Lancelot makes his demand, could have been only realized by subverting the social and moral conventions, and which, as soon as he takes his ring off and asks to be re-

leased from his vow, becomes doubly unreachable. Yet, this unreachability means nothing to Guenièvre.

The actions of the queen are determined by her idea and her ideal of love – not by her lover. On the contrary, she opposes Lancelot throughout the film. Whether he begs, argues or commands, she holds an unyielding standpoint, contrary to his. And this is not only so when he wants her to renounce her love, but especially when he finally begins undressing her, renouncing the Grail and desiring their connection via physical love. Then and there, the love of Lancelot and Guenièvre is, for her, something which has to be "not here, not yet" ("Do not undress me. Wait until tomorrow. Don't go to the tournament. When they have gone, you will come to my room."). To her, love is an act that needs to occur at a chosen time and place, after a ritual bath, and to be placed over all other concerns. When Guenièvre demands that Lancelot come to her room instead of going to the tournament where he should be proving his worth as a knight, her demand follows not just the Arthurian sources, but also the Leitmotiv of the film: idealism and its consequences. Just as Lancelot demands that his queen renounce her love life for the sake of his religious and chivalric ideals, Guenièvre demands that her knight renounce his chivalric life for the sake of her love ideal.

In other words, Guenièvre idealizes love in the second part of the film, just as Lancelot idealizes his Queen in the first part, kneeling down to kiss the edge of her robe and demanding that she become by renouncement his stairway to heaven. He idealizes her. She idealizes love. Arthur and his knights idealize chivalry. All idealize something and/or someone, and the pursuit of ideals and idealization of objects and/or of persons are the causes of their doom. The tournament in the middle of the film shows it, the fight at its end confirms it.

The tournament is once again a circular sequence, with the beginning mirroring the end: a mounted knight entering the ground through a gate; the same mounted knight leaving the ground through the same gate. In between, there are pairs of alternating elements:[7] a bagpipe, then a flag; the lower half of a mounted knight, then the upper half of sitting spectators. Knights fall to the ground, one after the other, hit by a spear. We *know* who strikes them down and how, but we cannot see it. A close shot of the shadow of a mounted knight on the sandy ground summarizes the key elements of the *mise en scène*: Lancelot is here *and* not here, he is present, but out of frame. Lancelot, the personification of the ideal of chivalry, is present-absent at the tournament, fells one knight after the next, and falls himself, invisibly wounded, disappeared, lost, to be sought and not found, having taken the place of the ideal he has been pursuing.

From this moment on, from the moment when the object searched, the Grail, and the protagonist of its search, Lancelot, become as one for the Arthurian court, the plot

7 "Lancelot triumphs over nine adversaries in precisely staged succession, each shot in the sequence functioning as part of a filmic *laisse parallèle*." Levy/Coote, "The Subversion of Medievalism", in: Utz /Swan (eds.), *Postmodern Medievalisms*, p. 102.

strives to an end that mirrors its deadly beginning. The end of the film brings the plot full circle. The soundtrack of military marches, which originally complements the scrolling text in the second sequence, re-appears in the second-to-last sequence, in which soldiers march through the forest to its beat. Close-ups on archers shooting arrows from trees alternate with close-ups on arrows hitting tree trunks instead of knights. Yet knights fall, and although the audience knows who is killing them and how, it is never depicted. In fact, the audience never sees an arrow hitting a living target; there is just a shot of horse with an arrow stuck in its head matching the close-up on a horse's eye at the beginning of the film. As with the shadow of the mounted knight at the tournament, this detail resumes the scene. In Bresson's film, "the ideal" is something that is never present, never within the reach of one's eyes or hands. But if you allow it to rule unconditionally, it will hit and wound guiltless living creatures (plants, animals, and symbolically nature), and it will kill you and make you kill your friends in the end. These are the circumstances of Gauvain's death: he has been pleading for concrete action and a tangible aim throughout the entire film, pursuing the same ideals as Arthur and Lancelot, always opposing Mordred's pragmatism and cowardice; and in the end, Gauvain is killed by the sword of his best friend.

On his death bed, Gauvain lies bandaged, his arms tied to his body, forever incapable of using his hands, palsied by the personified ideal of chivalry. In this moment, Gauvain begs the king not to blame or condemn Lancelot. In his last speech, he advises Arthur to end the conflict by a diplomatic solution before everyone dies, to take Guenièvre back as his honorable wife and queen, and to declare that she is innocent "because there is no proof of her adultery". Unfortunately, it is too late, and Mordred is already coming to kill Arthur.

In this, as with all of the other major events, the plot of the film matches the legend. But Mordred has also a specific function and significance in relation to the Leitmotiv of the film, the ideal and its consequences. When Lancelot comes to his tent, offering peace and friendship, Mordred refuses to take his outstretched hand. The film offers a political explanation for his motives, which still allows the viewers familiar with the legend to apply the motives traded by it. In the room of the Round Table, when the king asks Mordred for advice, Mordred answers dryly, "Sire, I had told you. I warned against such a foolish adventure. [...] Therefore, I won't comment on the disaster. [...] I'd rather keep silent." Later, when Lancelot bids him to make peace, Mordred retorts, "Arthur listens to your advice; he does not listen to mine." Mordred wants power within Arthur's court. At the same time, he considers the ideals pursued by Arthur, Lancelot and Gauvain foolish. He stands for pragmatism and power, and when he, too, is killed in the end, his death shows that pragmatism is no panacea against idealism, and that ideals do not become weaker just because they appear foolish to those who do not share them. The end of the story line does not only follow that of the original legend but also the internal logic of the film.

This logic is powerful within the universe of *Lancelot du lac*, and Lancelot embodies in it the destructive power that the ideal – any ideal – can yield when it is unquestioned. As implausible and even preposterous as the characters may appear, as incomprehensible as their motives and actions may seem to the audience, their final doom is unavoidable. Not only the original legend, but most importantly, the structure of the plot and the formal rigor of the film also make this outcome inescapable for the characters *and* credible for the audience. The life of Arthur's knights is and remains incomprehensible until the end of Bresson's film, but their death comes exactly as anticipated and in reference to the beginning, following the "vicious circle" created by the story line. Lancelot sets the mark when he tells the old peasant who had foreseen his death in the prologue and who warns him again: "Someone doesn't stop calling me, I must leave". Seeing her silent sadness, Lancelot asks the peasant: "What's wrong with you?" She answers dryly, with a faint shadow of anger in her voice, "You are stupid and you will never learn. That's what."

Monty Python and the Holy Grail

Monty Python and the Holy Grail consists of two main parts: an introductory sequence (the quest for the Knights of the Round Table) and main part (the quest for the Holy Grail). Each section consists of tales teaching moral and philosophical lessons. The tales of the introduction are shorter and the lessons are basic; those in the main part are longer and convey more complex thoughts.

The beginning of the film conveys a metadiegetic message: Film is a business, irony a weapon. The prologue and the opening credits are very clear about it: film, including *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, is far from being the noblest of businesses. For example, the "Dream factory" is a product placing "Dreem" factory, completely and globally sold to commerce ("Wi nøt trei ạ høliday in Sweden this yër", "76000 battery llamas from 'llama fresh' farms ltd. near Paraguay"), constantly making fools of the spectators ("Dentist on the job"). Those who work for the industry are a legion of unimportant names ("Also also with"), a troop damned to unspectacular, marginal and/or even stupid jobs ("Camera grip", "Boom swinger", "møøse noses wiped by"), exploited ("Property Buyer – Property Master – Property Men"), and neglected (while crew members' names are scrolling, subtitles discussing completely different topics divert the attention of the audience). Last not least, nearly everyone involved in the business is constantly at risk of being "sacked". On the other hand, film can simultaneously point out at all the above and publicize it ("The directors of the firm hired to continue the credits after the other people had been sacked, wish it to be known that they have just been sacked"). In addition, film can do this best through recurring irony, because irony allows to assert something and at the same time its contrary, thereby creating a thinkable alternative to what is being stated, and diminishing, or even negating, its validity.

The second lesson taught by the film, "England 932 a. D.", has two functions. On the one hand, it shows that asking questions brings you farther than coming up with answers, and on the other hand that rational questioning of a king's actions can help a person to avoid a positive answer, if asked to join him on adventures that could conceivably be dangerous:

> *King Arthur*: We have ridden the length of the land in search of knights who will join me in my court at Camelot. I must speak with your lord and master.
>
> *Castle Soldier*: What? Ridden on a horse? [...] You are using coconuts! [...] Where did you get the coconuts?

The theme of the dialogue that follows these lines ("can a swallow carry a coconut") is brought up again towards the end of the film, in the tale of the Death Bridge. The parables after the prologue and the second-to-last sequence of the film are not only related through parallelism and repetition, but also, by the fact that King Arthur learns a lesson in the first of these sketches that happens to save his life in the second. In the tale of the Death Bridge, Arthur has to cross a hanging bridge guarded by a keeper, who asks each traveler three questions and lets them fall into the abyss if they cannot be answered. Two of Arthur's knights die because they are unable to answer. Then it is the King's turn:

> *Bridge Keeper* [*threateningly*]: What is your name?
>
> *King Arthur* [*bravely*]: It is Arthur, King of the Britons.
>
> *Bridge Keeper* [*threateningly*]: What is your quest?
>
> *King Arthur* [*bravely*]: To seek the Holy Grail.
>
> *Bridge Keeper* [*threateningly*]: What is the air-speed velocity of an unladen swallow?
>
> *King Arthur* [*inquisitively*]: What do you mean? An African or European swallow?
>
> *Bridge Keeper* [*puzzled*]: I don't know that! [*He flies off the bridge and Arthur can safely cross*]

Quod erat demonstrandum: rational questioning, and asking questions instead of coming up with answers can be a very successful survival strategy.

After lessons one and two have shown the cardinal points of Monty Python's use of medievalism through filmic media, irony and pragmatism, lesson three ("The pest village") focuses on the main theme of the film: ideology (in general). This tale reminds the audience *per exemplum* of the general definition of ideology:

> *Dead Carrier*: Bring out you' dead.
>
> *Peasant* [*comes out with an old man hanging over his shoulder*]: Here's one.
>
> *Dead Carrier*: Nine pence.
>
> *Old Peasant*: I'm not dead!
>
> *Dead Carrier*: What?
>
> *Peasant*: Nothing. Here's your nine pence.

Old Peasant: I'm not dead!

Dead Carrier: He says he's not dead.

Peasant: Yes, he is.

Old Man: I'm not!

Dead Carrier: He isn't!

Peasant: Well, he will be soon, he's very ill.

Old Peasant: I'm getting better!

Peasant: No you're not. You'll be stone dead in a moment.

Dead Carrier: I can't take him like that. It's against regulations.

[…]

Peasant: Well, do us a favour. […] Isn't there something you can do?

Old Peasant: I feel happy!

[*Dead Carrier hits the Old Peasant very hard on the head with a stick*]

Peasant: Thanks very much.

Dead Carrier: Not at all. See you on Thursday.

Peasant: Right.

Dead Carrier: Right.

In this instance, it is clear that ideology is a vision of reality that aims to shape it according to one's interests ("Yes, he is"), occasionally recurring to verbal ("No you're not. You'll be stone dead in a moment") and physical violence (in this case, the stick) to attain one's aim.

The fourth lesson follows up directly on the third one, presenting both Arthurianism and Marxism as ideologies that interpret historical and political reality through the use of opposing interests and aims. Seeking knights to accompany him on his quest for the Holy Grail, Arthur runs into two members of an "autonomous collective", an anarcho-syndicalist and an apolitical one. The apolitical communard asks Arthur who he is, and the king's answer brings leads to the following exchange:

> *King Arthur*: The Lady of the Lake, her arm clad in the purest shimmering samite, held aloft Excalibur from the bosom of the water signifying by Divine Providence that I, Arthur, was to carry Excalibur. That is why I am your King.
>
> *Anarcho-syndicalist communard*: Listen. Strange women lying in ponds, distributing swords, is no basis for a system of government. Supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the masses, not from some farcical aquatic ceremony. […] You can't expect to wield supreme executive power 'cause some watery tart threw a sword at you. […] If I went around saying I was an emperor just because some moistened bint had lobbed a scimitar at me, they would put me away!

The dialogue makes the point clearer through an anticlimactic shift from the high register to a vulgar vocabulary ("Lady of the Lake" – "watery tart" – "moistened bint"),

and from a Christian symbol (sword) to an anti-Christian symbol (scimitar). The audience hears a pointed example of how the same thing can be interpreted and presented in very different, even opposite ways. And the question is: which example is more convincing, and why? This is demonstrated (more subtly) in the fourth and (very clearly) in the fifth lesson.

Lesson four shows that in a clash between courtly and baby boomer ideology, the latter of which prevails today because it presents an interpretation of reality that better corresponds to the intended audience:

> *Communard*: Come and see the violence inherent in the system! Help! Help! I'm being repressed!
>
> *King Arthur*: Bloody peasant!
>
> *Communard*: Oh, what a give away! Did you hear that? That's what I'm on about! Did you see him repressing me? You saw him, didn't you?

Lesson five states the point more clearly:

> *Black Knight*: I move for no man.
>
> *King Arthur*: So be it. [*They fight*]
>
> *King Arthur* [*after cutting off the Black Knight's left arm*]: Now stand aside, worthy adversary.
>
> *Black Knight*: 'Tis but a scratch.
>
> *King Arthur*: A 'scratch'?! Your arm's off.
>
> *Black Knight*: No, it isn't.
>
> *King Arthur*: Well, what's that then?!
>
> *Black Knight*: I've had worse. […] Come on, you pansy! [*They continue to fight*]
>
> […]
>
> *King Arthur* [*after cutting the Knight's other arm off*]: Victory is mine. [*Arthur turns away from the Knight and kneels on the ground*] We thank thee lord, that in thy… [*Black Knight kicks him from behind*]
>
> *Black Knight*: Come on, then!
>
> *King Arthur*: What?!
>
> *Black Knight* [*kicking Arthur again*]: Have at you!
>
> *King Arthur*: You are brave, Sir Knight, but the fight is mine.
>
> *Black Knight*: Ooh, had enough, eh?
>
> *King Arthur*: Look, you stupid bastard, you've got no arms left!
>
> *Black Knight*: Yes, I have!
>
> *King Arthur*: [*pointing at the Knight's rump*] Look!
>
> *Black Knight*: Just a flesh wound. [*He kicks King Arthur in the buttocks*]
>
> *King Arthur*: Look, stop that!

Black Knight: Chicken! Chicken!

[…]

Black Knight [*after King Arthur has also cut both his legs off*]: All right, we'll call it a draw.

First, an ideology that does not take reality into account enough, but pursues goals and presents an interpretation of things too deviant from what the audience can perceive and/or accept is not likely to be successful, but to appear ridiculous ("Just a flesh wound"). Second, the example of the Black Knight shows that fundamentalism tends to be an unwise way of promoting ideology because it leads to refuse diplomacy, even when it should be the best choice, and to fight on disregarding one's strength and that of the "enemy" ("Have at you!").

However, the expectations and the perception of the audience are not necessarily a good or reliable basis for judgment; on the contrary, under certain circumstances, audiences can regard even things that are blatantly false or absurd as the truth. Under these circumstances, an ideology (any ideology) can be successful exactly because it presents a vision of reality that is outrageous to reasonable people, but suitable to the wishes of the audience. This lesson is taught in the tale of the "witch", in which Arthur comes to a village where the people have "found a witch". In the film, this means that they have put a false large, pointy nose and a strange hat on a pretty young lady, and declare that she is a witch. The reason soon becomes clear: they want to "burn her", they are (as the dialogue shows) utterly dumb and ignorant, and for these reasons, they are ready to consider any interpretation of reality that aims at perceiving and shaping it according to their interests ("burn her") plausible, no matter how manifestly wrong, absurd, or ridiculous it is:

Bedevere: There are ways of telling whether she is a witch. […] Tell me, what do you do with witches?

Peasants: Burn them! Burn them! Burn them!

Bedevere: And what do you burn apart from witches?

First Peasant: More witches! [*second Peasant nudges him*]

Third Peasant: Wood!

Bedevere: So, why do witches burn? [*peasants think strained for a while*]

Second Peasant: 'Cause they're made of… [*evidently trying to guess the expected answer*] wood?

Bedevere: Good! [*Peasants congratulate the one who answered*] So, how do we tell whether she is made of wood? […] Does wood sink in water?

First Peasant: No.

Third Peasant: It floats.

Peasants: Throw her into the pond! Yeah! Yeah, into the pond!

Bedevere [*after silencing them*]: What also floats in water?

First Peasant: Bread!

Peasants: Apples!

[…]

King Arthur [*who has been listening all the while*]: A duck.

Bedevere [*to Arthur*]: Exactly! [*Addressing the peasants again*] So, logically…

First Peasant: If… she… weighs the same as a duck… she's made of wood…

Bedevere: And therefore…

Third peasant: A witch!

Peasants: A witch! A witch!

Bedevere: We shall use my largest scales.

At this point, one could think that King Arthur and Bedevere are using the peasants' stupidity to save the witch. Yet the sight of Bedevere's scale proves the contrary: the plates are obviously not balanced but held on one level by supports. Of course, as the supports are ceremonially removed at Bedevere's order, the young woman and the duck "weigh the same". "It's a fair cop", comments the "witch" sarcastically as the mob drags her away to burn her, and "the wise Sir Bedevere", who opportunistically provided the villagers with a vision of life tailored to their wishes, is the first to join King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table.

After the tale of the "witch", a musical intermezzo ("We're knights of the Round Table") closes the introductory part of the film and opens the main part, the "Quest for the Holy Grail". From this sequence until the end, the tales are longer, more complex, and coupled by an eye-catching visual or thematic element, such as a ridiculous, but deadly bunny. The tales are in some cases complementary, in others dialectically related. The coupling is not univocal; on the contrary, pairs can be formed in several ways. For example, the first tale of the French Castle (first tale of the main part), consists of two subparts, which are, respectively, connected to the second tale of the French Castle (last tale of the main part; link: silly taunting by the same French soldier) and with the "Cave of Caerbannog" (link: bunny). On the other hand, the "Cave of Caerbannog" also consists of two dialectically related subparts, the first of which (bunny attack, the knights can overcome) forms a pair with the French Castle, the second of which (cartoon monster attack, the knights cannot overcome) with God's appearance (link: interaction between a cartoon figure and characters impersonated by actors). The interconnectedness of the tales is emphasized by overlapping subparts and thematic repetition.

The macrostructure of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is not simply binary as the action is not linear (or circular); on the contrary, the structure of the film pointedly denies the existence of an univocal ruling principle and ironically negates the theme of the film which is, exactly, the search for the materialization of such a principle (the Grail). At the same time, the structure of the film is not just chaotic for the sake of

being chaotic; a central issue emerges if one compares the single tales of the main part. This issue is not just a criticism of contemporary society and politics,[8] but a critique of (religious, political and national) ideology, showing how it functions, and presenting useful defense strategies for people not wanting to follow or submit to an ideology.

The musical intermezzo "We're knights of the Round Table" and the tale of the "Knights who say Ni" present the same theme from two complementary angles. The most noticeable characteristic of the intermezzo is complete silliness, more specifically silly rhymes or assonances, enhanced by farcical dance movements. The knights sing,

> We're knights of the Round Table
> We dance whenever we're able
> We do routines and chorus scenes
> With footwork impeccable
> We dine well here in Camelot,
> We eat ham and jam and Spam a lot
> We're knights of the Round Table
> Our shows are formidable
> But many times we're given rhymes
> That are quite unsingable
> We are opera mad in Camelot
> We sing from the diaphragm a lot
> In war we're tough and able
> Quite indefatigable
> Between our quests we sequin vests
> And impersonate Clark Gable
> It's a busy life in Camelot
> I have to push the pram a lot.

King Arthur comments immediately after the last lines that, "No. On second thoughts, let's not go to Camelot. It is a silly place." Indeed, silly puns tend to become boring after a short while. Moreover, they do not affect the audience or *status quo* in any way: the intermezzo does not lend to the plot, but is immediately followed by an episode thematically and structurally unrelated to it, the appearance of God. This episode initiates the Quest for the Holy Grail. Finally, "We're Knights of the Round Table" is the only episode of the film that is related to another just through a link *ex negatione*. In the tale of Sir Launcelot, Prince Herbert, is banned from singing, which is his only interest, and this one action initiates the plot of the tale and serves as a basis for its moral lesson.[9] Another example of this is the tale of the Knights of Ni. Yet, to understand the relation between the intermezzo and this tale, it is first necessary to examine God's appearance, the episode that initiates the Quest for the Holy Grail.

8 Levy/Coote, "The Subversion of Medievalism", in: Utz/Swan (eds.), *Postmodern Medievalisms*, p. 118.

9 The tale of Sir Launcelot teaches a lesson complementary to the tale of Sir Galahad. Together, the tales show that it can be very unwise to let general principles ("a knight has to rescue a maid asking for help"; "a knight has to be chaste") lead one's actions a priori.

[*Thunder, churchlike singing*]

God: Arthur! Arthur! [*Caricatural cartoon head of God appears in a cartoon cloud*] King of the Britons!

[*King Arthur and the knights kneel down and bow deeply*]

God: Oh, don't grovel! One thing I can't stand, it's people groveling.

King Arthur: Sorry!

God: And don't apologize! Every time I try to talk to someone it's Sorry this and Forgive me that and I'm not worthy. [*King Arthur and knights avert their eyes*] What are you doing now!

King Arthur: I'm averting my eyes, o Lord.

God: Well, don't! It's like those miserable psalms. They're so depressing. Now knock it off!

King Arthur [*Facing Him*]: Yes, Lord!

God: Right. Arthur, King of the Britons. Your Knights of the Round Table shall have a task to make them an example in these dark times.

King Arthur: Good idea, o Lord!

God: 'Course it's a good idea! Behold, Arthur, this is the Holy Grail. Look well, Arthur, for it is your sacred task to seek this Grail. That is your purpose, Arthur: the Quest for the Holy Grail.

[*Cartoon cloud closes with the noise of a huge door closing*]

Lancelot: A blessing! A blessing from the Lord.

Galahad: God be praised!

[*A cartoon shows huge trumpets sounding on their own, then more trumpets blasting from clouds, so hard that they blow a shepherd away, naked men bending down farting into trumpets, pseudo-medieval angels flying in formation. Then a pseudo-Byzantine Christos Pantocrator rises from clouds, waving, gradually hidden by a ray that enrolls itself from his aureole, getting larger and larger until it completely fills the frame, more pseudo-medieval angels flying upward, blowing trumpets, an angel and a virgin pulling up the rubric "The Quest for the Holy Grail"*]

The beginning of the episode presents on the one hand religious discourse as ideology; on the other hand, it does not simply deny God's existence. Irony as a figure of thought is the salient feature of this sequence, in which God's presence is stated and negated at the same time.[10] The images show an ostentatious cartoon version of the Heavenly Father, and at the same time, the cartoon God immediately rejects the (genuine) topical discourse of devotion in such a credible way, what he says sounds completely authentic ("Sorry this and forgive me that and I'm not worthy […] those miserable psalms. They are so depressing"). The beginning of God's speech presents Christian religion as a discourse conveying a vision of things that is not God-given but invented by men. As "He Himself" commands, that is not even likely to please "Him", but should (and can) be "knocked off".

10 The highlighted use of irony as a figure of thought links God's appearance (beginning of the main part) to the credits (beginning of the introduction).

This provides the basis for the lesson taught in the tale of the Knights of Ni, who are a caricature of the central concepts of religious discourse and ideology. The Knights of Ni are also presented ironically in that they are harmless in the eyes of the audience, yet within the confines of the film, they are powerful and frightening. Their power lies in being "the keepers of the sacred words Ni, Peng and Nee Wom", "Ni" being a syllable that scares every character of the film to death when they hear it.[11] The "sacred words" are not sacred gifts from God; on the contrary, they are manifestly invented by men (probably by the Knights of Ni themselves, who can change them at will[12]) and considered sacred by convention. At the same time, these words are just meaningless[13] and dispensable syllables.

In the second part of the tale, Arthur deprives the knights of their power by unintentionally using in his answers a word that they "can't hear": "it". Like the "sacred words" of the Knights of Ni, this word is in itself completely harmless and, as the following dialogue makes clear by contrast, dispensable:

> *King Arthur*: Cut down a tree with a herring? It can't be done! [*Knights of Ni cover their ears with their hands, screaming in pain*]
>
> *Knight of Ni*: Don't say that word!
>
> *King Arthur*: What word?
>
> *Knight of Ni*: I cannot tell. Suffice to say it's one of the words the knights of Ni cannot hear.
>
> *King Arthur*: How can we not say the word if you don't tell us what it is?
>
> *Knights of Ni*: Ah! He did it again!
>
> *King Arthur*: What? *Is*?
>
> *Knight of Ni*: No, not *is*! You wouldn't get very far in life not saying *is*!

The difference between "Ni" and "it" is that "Ni" is manifestly harmless and dispensable, whereas "it" does not necessarily appear to be,[14] but needs to be identified as such. As a matter of fact, the word "it" is used only once before this episode (King

11 The intradiegetic power of the syllable "Ni" is confirmed by the fact that also King Arthur and Sir Bedevere can use it as a weapon, if it is correctly pronounced. This is important because it makes clear that the effect "Ni" has upon the Knights of the Round Table is not individual but collective and transferable.

12 When King Arthur brings them the shrubbery they asked for, the Knights of Ni declare, "We are no longer the knights who say Ni [...] we are the knights who say Ekke Ekke Ekke Ptang Zoo Boing." They do not give any reasons for this change.

13 The syllable "Ni" is not meaningless to all audiences: German spectators tend to assimilate it to *nie* ("never"). In doing so, however, they do not counteract, but confirm the issue of the tale. In fact, one can only assimilate "ni" to *nie* if one postpones pronunciation to the wish of finding a meaning for the "sacred word", since the German word *nie* is spoken with a (in fast speaking: rather) long "e", whereas the characters speak a pointedly short "i".

14 One only needs to remember Stephen King's *It* and to keep Freud in mind to understand why "it" does not necessarily appear harmless at first glance.

Arthur: "What is it you want?"). Whether this is a continuity error or an intentional emphasis on the arbitrary use of words that characterize the Knights of Ni, "it" is in fact hard to leave out, but in fact less hard to omit than "is", and in any case, "it" is not indispensable. The power of the Knights of Ni is a form of religious ideology based on "sacred words" that are nothing but harmless and dispensable syllables. This means that their power is founded on the unspoken assumption that a harmless, dispensable syllable *can* become the basis for the power of a speaker who arbitrarily declares it to be a "sacred word" and appoints himself its "keeper", as long as this is unquestioningly accepted by the speaking community. The power of the Knights who say "ni" is based on this unquestioned belief, and the knights' problem is that they themselves do not only take advantage of this belief, but share it as well. The problem of the Knights who say Ni is that they consider their arbitrary constructs reality. The way of thinking their power is based upon also determines their own thinking. This leads them to believe in the pernicious effect of "it". As a result, the use of a single syllable can actually deny them their frightening power.[15]

King Arthur does not intentionally use "it" as a weapon; on the contrary, he says the word accidentally, and just keeps using it because he starts a conversation with Sir Robin, who has just incidentally come by, and who also happens to be exactly the one knight who, as the ministrels sing, does not want to fight. The audience, however, can learn from the tale and follow King Arthur's accidental example. Moreover, spectators can link the tale of the Knights of Ni back to the musical intermezzo and come to the conclusion that harmless words in general, and silly word jokes in particular, do tend to become boring after a short time. However, if they are used in small doses under certain circumstances they can also be powerful weapons against religious ideology, curing *similia similibus*. In this sense, the statement by the cartoon God, that "Arthur, King of the Britons, your Knights of the Round Table shall have a task to make them an example in these dark times", is very well confirmed by the tale of the Knights of Ni.

The lesson of this tale is corroborated by a short cartoon which is inserted within the first and the second part of the tale and related to the second part of the story of the Cave of Caerbannog. In this cartoon, a monk writing the headline "The Tale of Sir Launcelot" (in an instance of *mise en abîme*), is bothered by an earthquake that makes his hand tremble and smear the page. The monk walks down the long, long stairs of his cloister, comes out to see the sun and sees two clouds with muscled legs jumping up and down, causing the earthquake. He orders them to "be off", they obey, and he can finish his page in peace.

The monk is on the form level a cartoon figure, on the level of reference a representative of God on earth like, for example, Joshua commanding the sun to stand still

15 I like to call this episode the deconstructive sequence of the film.

upon Gibeon.[16] A spectator could "take the image for the thing", read the cartoon ideologically, and say that the power of the monk over the jumping sun and clouds derives from God and proves His existence. However, the problem that such a spectator would have is that the cartoon sun and jumping clouds look so manifestly silly that it is very difficult to incorporate them into a religious discourse. In view of the cartoon images, and especially of the jumping sun and clouds, it is much easier to think that the victory of the monk is the result of the completely arbitrary will of a cartoonist (and of the film director), and that the monk can overcome the jumping sun and clouds simply because they are all figures of a cartoon and the cartoonist wanted it so. The second part of the tale of the Cave of Caerbannog follows up on this aspect.

In this tale, the Knights of the Round Table find a text carved in a stone wall, allegedly by Joseph of Arimathea:

> *Brother Maynard* [*reading the text carved in the stone wall*]: [H]e who is valiant and pure of spirit may find the Holy Grail in the castle of aaaargh.
>
> *King Arhur*: What?
>
> *Brother Maynard*: The castle of aaaargh.
>
> *Knight*: What is that?
>
> *Brother Maynard*: He must have died while carving it.
>
> *King Arthur*: Oh, come on!
>
> *Brother Maynard*: Well, that's what it says.
>
> *King Arthur*: Look, if he was dying, he wouldn't bother to carve 'aaaargh'. He'd just say it.
>
> *Brother Maynard*: Well, that's what's carved in the rock."
>
> *Knight*: Perhaps he was dictating it.
>
> *King Arthur*: Oh, shut up! Well does it say anything else?
>
> *Brother Maynard*: No! Just 'aaaargh'.
>
> *Knights* [*imitating*]: Aaaargh.
>
> *Knight*: Do you suppose he meant the 'Camaaaargh'?
>
> *Brother Maynard*: Where's that?

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16 Joshua 10:12-14 (New International Version): "On the day the LORD gave the Amorites over to Israel, Joshua said to the LORD in the presence of Israel: 'O sun, stand still over Gibeon, O moon, over the Valley of Aijalon.' So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies, as it is written in the Book of Jashar. The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day. 14 There has never been a day like it before or since, a day when the LORD listened to a man. Surely the LORD was fighting for Israel!" <http://www.biblegateway.com> (29 May 2010).

Knight: In France, I think.[17]

[...]

Sir Bedevere: Uh!

Lancelot: No no, 'aaargh' at the back of the throat.

Sir Bedevere: No no: 'uh' in surprise and alarm.

Lancelot: You mean a sort of 'ah!'

Sir Bedevere: Yes, that's right.

Knights: Uh! Uh!

Lancelot: My God!

[*Close shot of the cartoon monster*]

Brother Maynard: It's the legendary black beast of aaargh!

Indeed, a monk (or Joseph of Arimathea, or whoever else) attacked by a beast would hardly have the time or make the effort to carve a final "aaargh" in stone before running away or being eaten – unless the attack occurs in a low-budget movie. Goofs of this kind are even quite typical for sloppily made films. Evoking such films, the dialogue reminds us of the medial nature of what we are seeing and emphasizes it. At the same time, this scene establishes a link to the episode of the writing monk, whose sentence also ended in a smothering because of a monstrous creature. The implicit medial reason for the victory of the cartoon monk is supported by the explicit reason why the Knights of the Round Table can escape the Black Beast of Aaaarrgh: the monk and the monsters are cartoon figures, and the cartoonist controls them completely. To this medial aspect, the tale of the Cave of Caerbannog adds a new ideological one. If one considers that the Knights of the Round Table are representatives of a political, courtly and national ideology ("one king, one land"), then the fact that they would be defeated and eaten up by a silly looking cartoon monster if the death of the cartoonist didn't save them suggests that silliness and the use of media can be quite effective weapons against representatives of political and national ideologies.

The encounters with the French soldiers confirm this lesson. This time, King Arthur acts as the representative of political, national and religious values. In the name of these values, he demands first support, and later submission from the residents of a castle. Hereby, he makes three mistakes, each worse than the previous, and suffers a mortifying defeat. His mistakes could be called "colonial mistakes", as they derive mainly from the fact that Arthur projects the values he himself holds "sacred" onto a foreign people without questioning whether they want to share them. The first time, Arthur demands support from the representative of a traditionally unfriendly nation

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17 Indeed, the Quest for the Grail will in the end lead the knights to the castle of a French nobleman. Let us note in margin that "Dentist on the job" has the same function at the beginning of the film.

(France) and proposes as compensation … the permit to give further support, without the concrete prospect of a reward:

> *French Soldier*: This is the castle of my master, Guy de Loimbard.
>
> *King Arthur*: Go and tell your master that we have been charged by God with a sacred quest. If he will give us food and shelter for the night he can join us in our quest for the Holy Grail.

Of course, the French soldier is not interested at all. The second time, King Arthur demands to enter without promising anything at all ("In the name of the Lord, we demand entrance to this sacred castle!"). Obviously, the French soldier refuses again.

The king's second mistake refers back to the Black Knight. Not getting what he wants, Arthur wages a war without questioning the strength of his own military or of the enemy ("If you will not show us the Grail, we shall take your castle by force!"). His third and worst mistake is that he does not seem to learn from the first encounter at all. Again, the king demands access to the castle and threatens, "If you'll not open this door, we shall take this castle by force!"

This passage mirrors the first dialogue in the introduction (the 'first coconut dialogue'): In both episodes, Arthur comes to a castle, demands in the name of his mission to speak to the lord of the castle, hoping to get support, and is rejected by a guard. In both cases, he has to walk away empty-handed. But from one failure, he learns something (asking silly questions back instead of trying to answer) that will be useful later at the Death Bridge. On the contrary, he does not learn from the other failure. The consequences:

> *King Arthur*: If you'll not open this door, we shall take this castle by force!
>
> [*Liquid manure is poured on Arthur and Bedevere's heads*]
>
> *King Arthur* [*aghast*]: In the name of God and the glory of our…
>
> [*More liquid manure is poured on Arthur and Bedevere*]

In both disputes with the French soldier, King Arthur plays a role that is essentially similar to the one the Knights of Ni or the Black Knight played when in contention with him, and fails for the same reasons as they. The roles are simply reversed: he is now the representative of an ideology in which he unquestioningly believes.

On the one hand, Arthur and his knights remain essentially what they are all throughout the plot: "silly", as the French soldier repeatedly states.[18] However, their silliness proves to be a powerful weapon whenever they fight against an ideology, as in the tale of the Knights who say Ni, but does not help whenever they fight for an ideology. For

18 In the first contention: "I'm French! Why do you think I have this outrageous accent, you silly king!", "Go and boil your bottoms, sons of a silly person! I blow my nose at you, so-called Arthur king! You and all your silly English *kennniggts*!" In the second: "So, you think you could out-clever us French folk with your silly knees-bent, running about, advancing behavior.", "I burst my pimples at you, and call your door-opening request a silly thing, you tiny-brained wipers of other people's bottoms!".

example, in the first contention with the French the King and his knights offer a particularly strong evidence of their silliness by putting into practice the plan of "the wise Sir Bedevere", the "Trojan Bunny". The outcome is a horrible defeat. On the contrary, the French soldier is successful in fighting Arthur back, and the 'powerful weapons' of the French are daft taunting and a completely silly 'war technique'.

> *French Soldier*: I don't wanna talk to you no more, you empty-headed, animal food-trough wiper! I fart in your general direction! Your mother was a hamster, and your father smelt of elderberries!
>
> [...]
>
> *French Soldier* [*to the other soldiers*]: Fetchez la vache!
>
> *French Soldiers*: Quoi?
>
> *French Soldier*: Fetchez la vache! [*A cow is brought onto the wall*]
>
> *King Arthur*: If you do not agree to my commands, then I shall...
>
> [*The French soldiers catapult the cow onto King Arthur and his knights*]
>
> *King Arthur*: Jesus Christ! [*The cow lands on a knight's attendant*] Right. Charge!
>
> *Knights* [*charging the very high wall*]: Charge! Charge!
>
> [*Ducks, pigs, and other farm animals fly over the wall landing on the knights*]
>
> *King Arthur*: Run away! Run away!

Quod erat demonstrandum: sheer silliness can be a powerful weapon against ideology but is *not* a good instrument to promote a national, political and religious ideology. This is the central issue of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail.*

Against this background, the suggestion that the French might actually "have a Grail"[19] makes sense. One could say that the Grail is nothing but... silliness, and that the French showed in the film indeed "have one" in the sense that they have quite a measure of silliness. In this case, King Arthur's Quest is successful, but fails at the same time for the same reason for which it is started. The King and his Knights do find the Grail, but, blinded by the ideology they represent, they overlook that they, as the French soldiers, "already have one". In fact the knights had it already in the beginning, when Arthur "rode across the land", followed by a servant carrying coconuts and banging them together. One could further argue that the cartoon God – which means, if we learn from the Cave of Caerbannog: the cartoonist, and ultimately Monty Python – appoints Arthur and the knights with their Quest in order to "to make an example [of them]", because the Omniscient knows from both the legend and history that they will conceive the Grail as central symbol of religious, political and national ideology, and that the tale of their adventures (and failures) will therefore be an example to the audience. As a matter of fact, looking at King Arthur's and his knights' adventures, the audience can learn a lot about ideology. Moreover, it can learn that silliness can be a

19 "They say they've already got one."

quite effective weapon to unmask religious, political and national ideologies as such and to protect oneself from them.

Finally, lest spectators should start regarding silliness as an ideal of life and a panacea against ideologies, the film offers a couple of instructive tales.

The bunny in the first part of the Cave of Caerbannog teaches at least two useful lessons. In this episode, King Arthur and his knights are lead to a cave where they find information about the Grail. The entrance of the cave is guarded by a snow-white bunny rabbit, which proves to be an extremely aggressive, bloodthirsty monster, and kills three of the knights. Nota bene: it is not wise to ridicule your adversaries because you underestimate them. Seeking a way to overcome the ferocious rodent, the knights recall that Brother Maynard, who is accompanying them with some other monks, carries "the Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch" with him. At once, Arthur resolves to use it, and the monks read from the "book of armaments, chapter 2, lines 9-21":

> *Brother Maynard* [*reading*]: O Lord, bless this thy hand grenade that with it thou mayest blow thine enemies to tiny bits, in thy mercy. [...] And the Lord spake, saying, 'First shalt thou take out the Holy Pin, then shalt thou count to three [...]. Once the number three, being the third number be reached, then lobbest thou the Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch towards thy foe, who, being naughty in my sight, shall snuff it'.

At this point, the second moral emerges: along with the tale of the "witch",[20] the Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch demonstrates that religious, political and national ideologies can and in fact do resort to violence from time to time, and that in those cases, silliness is not a sufficient personal defense. When people are killed as a result of others' ideologies, the best remedy is not silliness, or humor, but a constitutional state under the rule of law. In fact, representatives of England's modern executive power terminate the Quest for the Holy Grail. In doing so, the two last lessons of the film are conveyed. First, if one considers that the historian who is killed in passing by Lancelot is a evidently a modern one, and therefore a representative of the future of Arthur's knights, then the episode shows that powerful people (for example, kings, knights, or presidents) should always bear in mind that what they do has consequences upon the future and that destroying one's farther future may very well affect one's immediate prospects. Second, if one considers that the cartoon God sends Arthur and his knights on their quest "to make them an example in these dark times", the link between the middle ages and modernity in this episode shows that the "dark times" are the Middle Ages *and* at the same time the present day.[21]

"God", "King" and "England" are unmasked as ideological constructs in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. But the existence of God is not simply denied; the perspective shown is that of agnosticism, not atheism. On the one hand, 'God' is the one who

20 The link between the first part of the Cave of Caerbannog and the tale of the "witch" is singing *requiem* and bringing death upon a creature of God.

21 Levy/Coote, "The Subversion of Medievalism", in: Utz /Swan (eds.), *Postmodern Medievalisms*, p. 110.

sends Arthur and his Knights on a search that, in the end, leads to the deconstruction of the ideology which they represent.[22] In certain respects, it is God Himself who deconstructs religious ideology, and His speech suggests that He does so out of a need for authenticity. On the other hand, 'God' is merely a cartoon figure controlled by the cartoonist, the film director and crew. In so far, the cartoon God's own beliefs mirror perhaps those of the director, the cartoonist and whoever rules them, deconstructing religious ideology, and His speech suggests that "They" do so out of a need for authenticity.

The film does not show a flattering portrait of the British Monarchy, either. Personified by King Arthur, the Crown does actually prove to be teachable and adaptive, thus assuring its survival beyond Arthurian times. Indeed, the question whether the British monarchy is the best form of government is not discussed in the film, but its longevity is stated and explained, whereas anarcho-syndicalism is not presented as a valid alternative.

The nation, England, is initially not very positively portrayed. Arthur is asked, "King of the who?!", and his answer does not convince the peasant crawling in the mud. Yet, taunted by the French, greedy, ignorant, prude, superstitious, gullible, cowards,[23] sometimes prone to vulgar Marxism, and ultimately silly as they may be in the film, the English still are a positive example "in these dark times". As a matter of fact, the film suggests that if they would only become conscious of their ultimate silliness and use it calculatedly, they would see that they "already have a Grail", and that it "is very nice [too], you know?"

Conclusion

Lancelot du lac and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* focus on closely related problems: idealism and ideology. In both films, the conceptual focus is reified in the Grail and treated with close reference to medieval sources. Both films appear to be based on two specific elements of late-modern and postmodern medievalism. For modern audiences, the Arthurian legend and the Quest of the Holy Grail bear the mark of medieval otherness; at the same time, modern authors and spectators usually associate the

22 In so far, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* could even be regarded as a forerunner of the post-secular society.

23 The reference to English "bravery" connects the tales of Sir Robin and that of the Knights who say Ni. One song begun in the first tale ("Brave Sir Robin ran away/ When danger reared its ugly head/ He bravely turned his tail and fled/ Yes, brave Sir Robin turned about/ And gallantly he chickened out/ Bravely taking to his feet/ He beat a very brave retreat/ Bravest of the Brave, Sir Robin") is continued in the second ("He's jacking it in and packing it up/ And sneaking away and buggering up/ And chickening out and pissing a pot/ Yes, bravely he is throwing in the sponge"). However, the minstrels are eventually eaten by the Knights of the Round Table during a hard winter, which leads to another lesson: ridiculing the Powers that Be does not prevent them from cannibalizing you.

Grail and Camelot with modern ideals, values, and concepts. Beside their otherness, and partly even because of it, medieval heroes and ladies (especially Arthurian ones) are perceived as such today. Postmodern audiences can identify with them and regard them as personifications of values and ideals like honor, courtesy or perfect love, which are positive values and ideals that the spectators usually do not believe in, or to which they do not (want to) live up to, but which they nevertheless generally perceive as such. In other words: the Arthurian legend and the Quest for the Holy Grail have a double potential and valence. On the one hand, they allow relating what is showed to one's reality; on the other hand, they enable to gain distance from it and thereby to gain new, other insights.

Bresson's and Monty Python's takes on this double function in different but related ways. On the one hand, they carefully avoid simply filling the Grail with modern values and concepts, but on the other hand, they use anachronism to make the action and the characters appear modern.[24] In doing so, they develop a critique that does not focus on a single given ideal, but can be applied to several, and to idealism in general. In both films, the Grail is presented as the material, tangible placeholder of "the ideal", simultaneously in abstract and physical senses. The Quest for the Holy Grail is the tangible placeholder for the effects and dangers of idealism.

Of course, there are important differences between the two films. First, the means used to keep the Grail intact as a symbol without linking it with modern projections are very different. Bresson generates absolute distance and otherness through the language used in his films; at the same time, his film allows recognition and identification to the story by remaining true to the legend, and mixing it with carefully calculated anachronisms.[25] When considering about fifty years' worth of reception and interpretation, it appears that his double strategy has not proven to be very successful because strong film language, and Bresson's is indeed very strong, has a much greater and more immediate impact on the audience that the previous knowledge or mental image of (for example) a legend. Indeed, the impression of complete, estranging otherness, income-

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24 "Although the physical appearance of these tents in *Lancelot du lac* is anachronistically modern – and deliberately so; together with doors, tables and chairs (and for that matter with the knights' 1970s haircuts and Guenièvre's less-than-authentic gowns), they form part of Bresson's re-created world which needs to convey the sense of something incomplete, lacking – their function touches a key medieval nerve." (Levy and Coote, "The Subversion of Medievalism…", p. 107)

25 For example, the prophecy of the peasant can be read as a prosaic war wisdom that applies to the Middle Ages as well as to modern times (especially when compared to stories of trappers or American western settlement). "He whose footfalls are heard before he is seen will die within the year" has a very simple meaning. That is, he who moves through the forest so noisily that you can hear him coming (i.e., he who is so careless or inept that he can be heard coming) cannot survive in this world of battle. The peasants' sayings also have implicit and explicit meanings, uniting mysticism and down-to-earth wisdom, the Middle Ages and the modern times.

prehensibility and implausibility created by this film seems to drown out recognition so completely that spectators cannot relate *Lancelot du lac* to the Arthurian world they know, or even to their own lives. In contrast, the Monty Python film uses (not only, but principally) irony to generate distance and otherness, silliness to allow sympathy and identification, and key points from the legend mixed with anachronistic details to support both. Looking back on the film's reception, one could say that this strategy has made the film much more appealing and understandable than Bresson's. However, this aspect is only one face of the medal; the other is a second important difference between the two films.

Lancelot du lac presents a radical critique of idealism without taking up the position of materialism or pragmatism. Bresson's film does not unmask Arthur, Lancelot, Gauvain and Gueniėvre as representatives of an ideology, promoting a vision of things that aims at shaping them according to their personal interests. On the contrary, these characters obsessively act and speak in a way that contradicts or neglects what manifestly ought to be their interests. Bresson's film presents characters who fundamentally and absolutely follow ideals (the Grail, chivalry, love), and show no recognizable effort to make these ideals understandable for the viewers. The characters simply state their ideals without justifying or explaining them, unconditionally following what they think their beliefs demand from them, murdering innocent creatures, killing one's own friends, and dying willfully. This makes it very difficult for late modern and post-modern audiences to identify with Bresson's knights. Spectators who are not prone to fundamentalism generally cannot (and will not) spontaneously identify with characters who let an ideal unconditionally rule their lives and govern their actions unless they are given the chance to develop some understanding for this ideal or some measure of human sympathy for the characters. However, *Lancelot du lac* clearly deprives the audience of this. Bresson's rigorous film language and radical thematic approach has a high potential to generate a 'dead lock in reception": those who could, or should, understand generally don't want to; those who would want to understand generally cannot. The main reason seems to be that Bresson's film makes absolutely no formal or thematic concessions to the audience. One may consider this an aesthetic flaw, but *Lancelot du lac* is arguably the counterpart to *Le procès de Jeanne d'Arc*, the other side of the ideal. Jeanne demonstrates how much strength can be gained from a true belief in an ideal in times and places where (religious) ideology rules unquestioned. Her manly complement, Lancelot, personifies and represents the destructive power that the ideal – any ideal – can hold when it rules unquestioned.[26] Within the context of Bresson's work, *Lancelot du lac* makes perfect sense.

In contrast, Monty Python presents a satirical critique of ideology, a variety of tales attacking political, national and religious folly through irony, derision and wit. God,

26 The fact that the protagonists of the films are a woman (Jeanne) and a man (Lancelot) may be unintentional – at least, an intention cannot be proved –, but it is hardly unrelated to Bresson's background and general frame of thought.

King and England are clearly the main targets of the film, but vulgar Marxism does not get off scot-free. Pragmatism and democracy prevail in the end, and the executive power of the British constitutional monarchy shows its positive qualities by arresting the murderers of the historian and their "silly king" before they lead one more self-defeating attack against French outposts.

Of course, this message is much easier to digest than Bresson's, but its use of medievalism is comparable, and the Terry-Gilliam collaboration appears as a satirical complement to Bresson's tragic, radically negative critique of idealism. In *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table act as representatives both of pragmatism[27] and idealism. The tale of the witch, the tale of the Knights who say Ni, and the Death Bridge present the King and his knights as down-to-earth pragmatists who even resort to opportunism when they think it necessary. The tale of Castle Anthrax, the episode of the autonomous collective, and, most importantly, the two episodes of the French castle shows them as (silly) idealists who unquestioningly believe in their national and religious mission and for whom the cartoon God is no ridiculous caricature, but the True God sending them on a "sacred quest". Moreover, whether they act as pragmatists or as idealists, Arthur and his knights are so thoroughly human that it is not at all difficult sympathize and identify with them. In *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, medievalism serves its purpose perfectly. On the one hand, it allows the audience to relate the Arthurian Middle Ages to modern time; on the other hand, it enables the spectators to gain distance from both these realities, and thereby gain new insights about the present.

In the end, *Lancelot du lac* and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* may have much more in common than meets the eye, representing the two sides of the same late modern and postmodern medievalist coin. Be it negative or positive, tragic or comical, heavy or light, what we see bears the double mark of distance and identification. You can – to speak colloquially – take it or leave it, or take it *and* leave it at the same time, believing and laughing at you own mistakes.

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