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A Postcolonial View on *King Arthur* (2004) and *Nomad* (2005)

Abstract

King Arthur (2004) and *Nomad* (2005) both choose a medievalist setting aiming for audiences. Both films tell stories of young war lords during periods of political transition which question old allegiances and loyalties redefining national and cultural belongings. Arthur brings the Saxon invasion to a brief halt in the period of Roman retreat and Mansur (alias Ablai Khan) leads Kazakhstan into freedom in the eighteenth century. Both heroes are grappling with alienation from their origins caused by colonial hegemony. Coping with the instabilities of their hybrid identities they choose opposing ways of building new identities. Arthur Fuqua's king takes on the challenge of merging various cultural heritages founding a civilization that symbolizes the transnational aspirations of contemporary Europe. Sergei Bodrov's Mansur annihilates Kazakh colonial past when he unknowingly kills his brother in arms. Erali's sacrifice ends the endless disputes of the Kazakhs that originate in their hybrid identity thwarting national restoration. Thus both films serve ambiguous ideological purposes by defining a hostile other. The Saxon invaders represent racist Nazis who were defeated in order to create modern Europe. The defeat of the Jungar invaders helps constructing an essentialist historical order in which the creation of Kazakhstan appears to be the restoration of a pre-modern nation. Both films show the ideological power of mediaevalism offering multi-layered methods of addressing a diverse global audience.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, nationalism, trans-nationalism, medievalism, Arthur, Nomad, Kazakhstan.

The Middle Ages have been diligently explored by scholars for generations but also have inspired writers and film directors to tell stories about their countries' histories from a contemporary perspective. In the following, I want to show that interpretations of the Middle Ages, both old and new, nationalistic and cosmopolitan, exist in films adopting modernist and postcolonial narratives. These interpretations of the Middle Ages convey hidden or silent assumptions about the politics of representations of the Middle Ages that are convincing to their respective audiences in an unobtrusive and highly contemporaneous way.

This is what makes many films about the Middle Ages difficult to watch after a few decades. The values of the protagonists and the underlying ideological structure of the narrative are lost. The costumes, however, remain. A Hollywood filming of the story of King Arthur, such as *The Knight of the Round Table* (1953) by Richard Thorpe, would not be very popular with a contemporary audience, but may tell cultural and social historians a great deal about U.S. values in the early fifties. We do not identify with medieval heroes unless their actions tell us something about ourselves, something we can identify with.

Antoine Fuqua's *King Arthur* (2004) portrays Britain as a cosmopolitan, post-colonial space after the retreat of the Roman colonisers and a glorious victory over the forces of tyranny, here represented by a hoard of Saxons depicted as racist Nazi invaders. In Ivan Passer's and Sergei Bodrov's *Nomad* (2005), Mansur, the national redeemer, drives the Dsungar Mongols out of Kazakhstan. Both films do not really meet our expectations of what belongs to the Middle Ages but rather explore the fringes of this period in history that seems to be quite difficult to define the longer one studies it. *King Arthur* takes place in the fifth century, when the "historical" Arthur is believed to have roamed Britain. *Nomad* is situated in eighteenth-century Kazakhstan. It is only when European canons are fired at the very end that we realise that these are not the Middle Ages of our understanding. It is perfectly correct, however, to claim that the film is situated in a medieval time and that the liberation is associated with the dawn of freedom and a new, scientific age. Neither film tries to be authentic in its representation of the Middle Ages. In both films, the Middle Ages are a location of alterity and fantasy that is remote enough to make us forget that they address contemporary issues in the guise of a different historical age.

Both films tell national stories from a postcolonial perspective. In both films, people are rescued from the hands of colonial occupiers; in both films there is a young saviour and a sagacious old leader who shows the path into the future. The postcolonial view of these two films works in analogy to the medieval studies view: it rethinks temporality itself and intervenes with our understanding of modernity.¹ When Jewers says that the "film should either soften historical claims or put up with critique of the inaccuracies that detract from its effectiveness," she expects a film to deny the very habits of modernity it tries to establish as an appropriate view on the Arthurian story, "the untold story behind the legend", as the film characterises itself. The issue is not historical authenticity², but to define the differences between the forms of representing this authenticity in the tradition of

¹ See Cohen's statement defining the postcolonial in the Middle Ages: "Postcolonial theory has long been urging just a localized, contextual critical perspectivism on geography, culture, recent history. A criticism that has detailed the imperialistic colonization of space surely must now turn to an examination of the epistemological colonization of time" (*The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. J. Cohen, Houndsmill 2001, p. 4–5). In view of this, it is beside the point when Caroline Jewers argues that in "attempting to recreate Arthur, and in doing justice to the Sarmatian theory [...] we see the most heavily anachronized Arthur yet" (p. 94). By introducing a postcolonial view, Fuqua deliberately abandons all conventions of representing Arthur.

² This must be distinguished from the historical sloppiness that permeates the story, as Jewers shows when discussing Frank Thompson's tie-in novel based on Franzoni's script (p. 102).

colonising the Middle Ages and that of establishing a postcolonial perspective that modernises our perception of transcultural identity and ethnicity in post-colonial Europe³ or hides postcolonial concepts of hybridity to support new nationalisms.

On the basis of Cohen's groundbreaking work on the postcolonial Middle Ages, Finke and Schichtman define postcolonialism in medieval film by focusing on its attempts "to bring to light subaltern knowledges, to recover history and culture from below" and to resist attempts "to give a hegemonic 'normality' to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples", by focusing attention on hybridity and acts of cultural translation.⁴

While Finke and Schichtman define postcolonial criticism against the background of films about the crusades, Antoine Fuqua's postcolonialism is not an orientalist one, but questions our modern view on Arthur from the colonial perspective of English nationalism or Roman imperialism. Arthur takes the side of the "oppressed, blue-faced but red-blooded Celtic fringe of Braveheart".⁵ The various inhabitants of Britain are depicted as hybrids who share a common colonial history. Fuqua's Britain is "not really so different from postcolonial Britain today, where diverse postimperial cultures are engaged in the challenging process of analyzing what Britishness means".⁶

While *Arthur* creates a cosmopolitan space in which the rights of the weak are acknowledged and protected from imperial power politics and fundamentalist religion⁷, the hero of the Kazakh film unifies the various interests of rival factions to forge national unity. This nationalist narrative won the film generous financial support by the Kazakh parliament and praise from president Nazarbayev. In spite of these notable ideological differences, both films show the disintegration of cultural and national boundaries in a globalised world. They both also show signs of

³ C. Jewers, *Mission Historical, or "[T]here Were a Hell of a Lot of Knights": Ethnicity and Alterity in Jerry Bruckheimer's King Arthur*, [in:] *Race, Class, and Gender in "Medieval" Cinema*, ed. L.T. Ramey, T. Pugh, New York 2007, p. 94.

⁴ L.A. Finke, M.B. Schichtman, *Cinematic Illuminations*, Baltimore 2010, p. 200–2001, quote H. Bhabha, *Postcolonial Criticism* [in:] *Redrawing the Boundaries*, ed. S. Greenblatt, G. Gunn, New York 1992, p. 437. H.K. Bhabha (*The Location of Culture*, London 1994, p. 159) defines hybridity as "the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal [...]. Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power".

⁵ N. Haydock, *Digital Divagations in a Hyperreal Camelot: Antoine Fuqua's "King Arthur"* [in:] *Movie Medievalism: The Imaginary Middle Ages*, Jefferson 2008, p. 182.

⁶ C. Jewers, *Mission Historical, or "[T]here Were a Hell of a Lot of Knights": Ethnicity and Alterity in Jerry Bruckheimer's King Arthur*, [in:] *Race, Class, and Gender in "Medieval" Cinema*, ed. L.T. Ramey, T. Pugh, New York 2007, p. 99.

⁷ For the link between postcolonial criticism and cosmopolitanism, see Timothy Brennan, who shows that in cultural products written for the Western public, postcolonial criticism loses its touch with the disadvantaged of the developing world. Literature such as Rushdie's novels ultimately becomes cosmopolitan, a fashionable commodity (T. Brennan, *At Home in the World. Cosmopolitanism Now*, Cambridge, Mass., 1997, p. 19–22).

being adapted for an international audience. *King Arthur* reconciles both a U.S. American and a European perspective, the idealism of an imperial power with the deep suspicion of post-imperial Europe in any centralised form of power. *Nomad* tries to reconcile an Eastern-European with Western- and Central-European perspectives, old nationalism with transnational visions of a borderless Europe.

King Arthur starts in Eastern European Sarmatia. The subtitles tell us that his descent is based on “new archaeological evidence”. Young Arthur and other sons of the local nobility are taken to Rome as hostages in order to be educated as Romans. Later on, Arthur becomes a military leader called Artorius who fights with Lancelot, Galahad, Bors and Gawain in Britain. They look forward to the end of their military service for the Roman Empire.

By making Arthur a Sarmatian who serves as a military leader in Celtic, pre-Anglo-Saxon Britain, the ideological structure of the narrative is defined.⁸ In the course of events, the centre of power (Rome) will be replaced by new peoples coming from the Western and Eastern peripheries of the Roman Empire. They are the colonised who create a new order that is neither Celtic, nor Sarmatian, nor Roman, but rather all of the above. Decentering Europe creates the space of the post-colonial Middle Ages, a place with “no frontiers, only heterogeneous borderlands with multiple centres”.⁹ Arthur’s surprising origin in Sarmatia (in the east) and his military service (in the west) describe the uttermost fringes of borderless, modern Europe.¹⁰ Writers of the European Enlightenment such as Voltaire, Gibbon, and Forster identified the Sarmatian with less civilised or even barbarian Eastern Europe¹¹. This tradition is deliberately revised in Fuqua’s film. The decolonisation of Europe provides the discursive modes of analysis, as Cohen explains for medievalist studies.¹² The same holds true for films with medieval themes.

Power in the centre is corrupt, both in the Roman military administration and in the institutions of the Church. The destructive power of Rome is caused by religious zealots in the Church and by the imperialistic decadence of Rome’s secular officials. Even worse, Rome cannot protect the locals from the savage invasion of the Saxons. The values the centre stood for are represented by the leaders of the tribes living at the margins of the Empire. Despite the fact that their release from military service had been promised to them, Arthur’s men are forced into a rescue mission whose aim is to bring back a Roman family who lives in a settlement close to Hadrian’s Wall. The Pope himself is the godfather of the Roman family’s

⁸ Haydock confirms Tom Shippey’s findings. Shippey “rightly identifies *From Scythia to Camelot* by C. Scott Littleton and Linda A. Malcot as a major source for the film’s depiction of Arthur’s knights as a band of Sarmatian cavalry” (N. Hazdock, op. cit., p. 167) Jewers, terms this the “Sarmatian theory” (C. Jewers, op. cit., p. 92–93).

⁹ *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, op. cit., p. 7.

¹⁰ See for Franzoni’s reasons to choose Sarmatian history as one point of reference (C. Jewers, op. cit., p. 102–103). See also J. Matthews, *A Knightly Endeavor: The Making of Jerry Bruckheimer’s King Arthur*, [in:] *The Round Table: The 2004 Movie King Arthur*, “Arthuriana” 2004, Fall, no. 14(3), p. 115–120.

¹¹ L. Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford, CA 1994, p. 91, 93, 298, 338.

¹² *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, op. cit., p. 8.

son. The rescue mission will bring about the unlikely alliance of the fiercest enemies of the Roman Empire in Britain, the Picts, or Woads, against the invading army of the Saxons.¹³

Arthur turns into a military leader who intervenes with his troops to become the founder of a new post-Roman Britain. He personifies the old Roman virtues which have become lost as a result of corruption. Arthur gradually loses faith in the Empire and therefore is able to gain autonomy as a leader when he has to take responsibility for those in need of his protection. Together with the men of his fellowship he no longer fights for Rome but for an independent Britain that must be defended from the Saxons. In the tradition of Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954), the Sarmatian fellowship is willing to die for a noble cause and to serve the weak.¹⁴ The postcolonial re-interpretation of this plot is original with Fuqua. The Sarmatians define this position in late-Roman history and renew the values Rome had stood for in the past. The blue-faced Woads¹⁵ fight for their freedom and their sovereignty, thus providing the ideological foundation of such a re-institutionalisation of Roman values. The Saxons stand for the opposite of what Rome stood for, they are not colonisers, but racist invaders, savage predators deliberately represented in a fashion reminiscent of SS troops.¹⁶ Without them, the Roman military would appear just like another occupant army. But the Romans have never been like the Saxons. The final showdown brings about a terrible battle in which some of Arthur's men sacrifice themselves to protect the future of their new allies, the Picts. This happens when Lancelot saves Keira Knightley, who personifies a Pict Amazon warrior, from the murderous hands of a malicious Saxon played by German actor Til Schweiger.

The story distinguishes good and evil clearly: The Saxons are evil. They are represented by the pitiless disinterested voice of their leader, played by Stellan Skarsgård: "Burn every village, kill everyone!" he tells his men. The trespasses of the Romans and Christian missionaries might be cruel too, but they are motivated by ideals, far different from the evil, cold-blooded, racist extermination policy of the Saxons. The Saxons remind one of the Nazi occupation army and the Saxons' first major defeat on the ice of a lake makes that point again by alluding to Sergei Eisenstein's 1938 film *Alexander Nevsky*.¹⁷ The film on Russia's victory over the

¹³ According to K.J. Harty (*King Arthur on Film: New Essays on Arthurian Cinema*, Jefferson 1999, p. 23), there is only one other film in which King Arthur fights both the Picts and the Saxons, *King Arthur, The Young Warlord*.

¹⁴ See Haydock: "The chief source of King Arthur's plot, characterization, and even its ideology" has very little to do with either the historical or legendary Arthur. It is based quite closely on Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954) and [...] Preston Sturges's *The Magnificent Seven* (1960)". N. Haydock, op. cit., p. 167–168.

¹⁵ This is reminiscent of William Wallace's blue face paint in Mel Gibson's film on Scottish resistance against the English in *Braveheart* (1995).

¹⁶ In contrast to this version of the story, Seven Bassett acknowledges that the Germanic invaders formed with fifth-century Britons "a hybrid society, Anglo-Saxon in name and language but in blood a successful fusion of the two peoples". S. Bassett, *In the Search of the Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms* [in:] *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, ed. S. Bassett, London 1989, p. 21–22.

¹⁷ N. Haydock, op. cit., p. 168.

Teutonic Order in the “Battle of the Ice” on 5 April 1242 foreshadowed in its representations of the German Order the Wehrmacht invading the Soviet Union in June 1941.

In opposition to the Saxons, Artorius and his fellowship are depicted as good and brave warriors. The Woads – prior to their alliance with Arthur cruel savages¹⁸ – turn into liberation fighters defending the freedom of their country. When Arthur liberates Guinevere (Keira Knightley), who is conceived as an Amazon and a strong woman, from the torture chamber of missionary monks, this marks a change in their campaign, an intervention that follows ethical principles. They do not fight for Rome any longer. Merlin, the old sage, recognises the overall meaning of Arthur’s decision and envisions an alliance between Sarmatians and Picts.

This makes it necessary, however, to acknowledge one’s own hybrid identity as a colonised tribe originating from the margins of the Roman Empire. Merlin offers a new alliance to Arthur and his men, because he accepts the fact that the Woads, whether they fought the Romans or not, have been changed by the colonisers. There is no original state of affairs they could possibly go back to. Unlike the Saxons, the Woads¹⁹ do not believe in purity of blood and superiority. The postcolonial condition is defined by both emancipation and the acknowledgment of one’s own hybridity. In sharing the burden of defending Britain against the Saxons, Arthur’s Sarmatian fellowship recognises their new collective identity. As individuals they might feel homesick and want to go back to their home country. Arthur manages, however, to show to them that they are really without any home and that they do not belong anywhere unless they create a home for themselves. The colonisers of Britain brought them there; they will remain aliens and without a home unless they redefine their postcolonial and transcultural identity. Arthur’s men accept that there is no return to a pre-colonial world. They have been changed for good, and Britain offers a new home to all her hybrid peoples. The resistance of Arthur’s fellowship is provoked by the ambivalence of the postcolonial site, in Bhabha’s words, “uncanny forces of race, sexuality, violence, cultural and even climatic differences [...] emerge in the colonial discourse as the mixed and split texts of hybridity”. The hybrid “breaks down the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/outside”.²⁰

¹⁸ Haydock points out that Arthur’s battle with the Woads upon his arrival in southern Scotland might be a reference to the Battle of Celidon Wood (Coed Ceiydon), the seventh of Arthur’s battle that Geoffrey of Monmouth lists. This battle “though against the Saxons, resembles that in the film” (N. Haydock, op. cit., 169–170).

¹⁹ The “image of the aged, bearded Merlin is also the expected version of the character in the new millennium,” writes M.A. Torregrossa (*Hard Day’s Knights: First Knight, A Knight’s Tale, and Black Knight* [in:] *The Medieval Hero on Screen. Representations from Beowulf to Buffy*. ed. M.W. Driver, S. Ray, N.C. Jefferson, London 2004, p. 172), about the famous magician and is certainly wrong with regard to the military and political leader of the Woads in King Arthur.

²⁰ H.K. Bhabha, *Signs Taken for Wonders* [in:] Idem, *The Location of Culture*, London 1994, p. 161, 165; C. Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*, Durham, NC, 1999, p. 16.

In contrast to *King Arthur*, the postcolonial site of the second film, *Nomad*, denies hybridity and resolves to nationalist and essentialist solutions. While *King Arthur* retains Bhabha's concept of hybridity as active and self-conscious resistance against hegemonial colonisers, *Nomad* shows how this resistance might confirm the structures Bhabha wanted to undermine.²¹ *Nomad's* concept of hybridity rather belongs to an ethnocentric view of postcolonial theory.²² *Nomad* takes place in the Kazakh steppe. In 2001, the Kazakh parliament granted \$1,5 million in financial support for this film, which was shot in Kazakhstan, China and Russia. A famous writer, Rustam Ibragimbekov from Azerbaidzhan (*1939) wrote the screenplay. The film was first directed by Ivan Passer (*Cutter's Way*, 1981) and then by the Russian Sergei Bodrov who is known for having filmed *Mongol*. Some critics have compared *Nomad* with a Western movie in the style of John Ford – but this is misleading. The film tells the story of a power struggle among Kazakh tribes in a feudal society. Eventually one young man, the saviour of the Kazakh nation, unifies these warring tribes and leads them to a liberation war against the Dsungar Mongols.

The constellation of the characters is similar to that of *King Arthur*. A military hero with exceptional gifts is prepared by a teacher to fulfil the role of a saviour to his people. Both stories tell the end of a long history of colonisation by a powerful foreign power. Both the Romans and the Dsungar Mongols have been so successful in establishing their own laws and their own culture that the colonised have a hard time recognising the disguise, or, in Homi Bhabha's terminology, the mimicry they had used for generations in order to be accepted by the colonisers. Arthur does not know whether he is Roman or Sarmatian. Similarly, many Kazakhs feel an inherent loyalty towards the Dsungars. In their desire to become like the colonisers, they have developed a mimicry that alienated them from being who they are. Before emancipation they always choose the wrong objects of identification, never reaching perfection, as it is defined by the colonisers. It is only the recognition of this hybridity that eventually empower both Kazakh tribes and Arthur's Sarmatian fellowship. Both Arthur and Mansur oppose the colonial rule only because they realise that they have become like them, without ever being accepted by them. The Kazakhs are at times hard to distinguish from the Dsungar Mongols, but they nevertheless do not belong among them. There are traitors who collaborate with the Dsungar rulers in order to be recognised by them. In both films, the subversion of the old order begins with the definition of a new national space. The way this is done, however, is quite different. Hybridity is embraced in *King Arthur* and rejected in *Nomad*.

²¹ This ambivalence is part of Bhabha's concept: "While he claims to be attempting to 'provide a form of the writing of cultural difference in the midst of modernity that is inimical to binary boundaries', perhaps the greatest irony [...] is that his conceptualizations of the means to move beyond the binary in fact depend entirely upon the structures he is trying to undermine for their effectivity. Hybridity, perhaps the key concept throughout his career in this respect, obviously depends upon a presumption of the existence of its opposite for its force. This leads to the danger that the postcolonial or hybrid will itself become essentialized or fixed." *Postcolonial Criticism*, eds. Moore-Gilbert B., Stanton G., Maley W., London 1997, p. 38.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

In both films, this new space has to be appropriated from the colonisers. This is not only a military, but even more so a cultural achievement. In his filmscript, Rustam Ibragimbekov uses aspects of the historical Ablai Khan (1711–1781), who succeeded in giving Kazakhstan a shape on the map. Oraz, the Kazakh, could be compared to Merlin prophesying the birth of a child who is believed to unify the warring tribes of the Kazakh steppe. This gives some eschatological meaning to the whole story. Like Herod, Galdan, the ruler of the Dsungars, gives the order to kill every son of Kazakh sultans.

The fellowship of men who accompany the respective leader into postcolonial freedom is highly significant in characterising the underlying ideology. For both leaders it is difficult to accept that they are meant to play that role. This is quite a stereotypical feature and signifies that they do not desire power for its own sake. Mansur's best friend is Erali (played by Hernandez). While Arthur and his friends accept their hybridity in a postcolonial period, the nationalist author of the film about the birth of the Kazakh nation does not have any interest in doing the same. The colonial "mimicry" that changed the Kazakhs is overcome in a symbolic ordeal by battle between the two friends. Both friends wear masks and do not recognise each other. Erali suspects that his adversary, whom he is forced to fight in the camp of the Dsungars, must be his friend. He sacrifices himself to save the saviour of the new nation. The masks which are put on by the Dsungars symbolise the colonial mimicry, the fact that they are not free but are rather expected to adopt the rules of the colonisers. Instead of acknowledging their hybridity, mimicry becomes an obstacle to freedom which has to be removed in a ritual killing. The meaning of the deadly fight between the two friends is developed in their love to a beautiful Kazakh woman, Gaukhar.

The mask stands for the alienation the Kazakhs have suffered because of colonization. The ordeal by battle stands for the loss of identity a people occupied and colonised by a foreign power suffers. The battle decides who will get the bride, the personification of the forbidden love for Kazakhstan. The ideological significance of this love is the hope for the foundation of a new nation, the marriage between the new leader and the country, which is personified by the bride. The bride cries when she watches the two friends fighting each other, because of the sacrifice necessary to liberate the Kazakhs from their colonised other. The meaning of the marriage between Gaukhar and Mansur goes back to the political theology of the Middle Ages and can also be found in John Borman's *Excalibur* (1982). The political symbols of the story are nationalistic. The fact that the otherness of the Dsungar Mongols will always remain a part of their own identity is denied. This denial legitimates the bloody sacrifice of Mansur's adversary Erali. During the period of their colonization the Kazakhs have become a distorted imitation of the Dsungars. For the same reason – the denial of colonial hybridity – the character of a traitor is introduced, living at the court of the Kazakh sultan, Mansur's father. The hybrid double identity of the Kazakhs is symbolically homogenised in the battle between Mansur and Erali.

Parallel to the violent removal of the double identity of colonial mimicry, Mansur takes revenge for the murder of his mother. Killing his friend Erali is

like killing the alter ego of his colonised self that allows him to marry Gaukhar and to become the leader of Kazakhstan. The inner fight for one's "true" identity is decided. It was not sufficient to defeat the Dsungars. The Kazakhs had also to defeat their colonised otherness. The identity of the colonised is that of a nomad. Ozar's comment makes the meaning of the battle accessible: "The sacrifice of the one brings life and hope for the other". The double identity is regarded as a genuine obstacle to liberation and national sovereignty. In his study on *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha describes this mechanism in the following words:

The Process of translation is the opening up of another contentious political and cultural site at the heart of colonial representation. [...] The incalculable colonized subject – half acquiescent, half oppositional, always untrustworthy – produces an unresolvable problem of cultural difference for the very address of colonial cultural authority.²³

The combat in the camp of the Dsungar ruler symbolises the rejection and subversion of the coloniser's authority and the contempt for one's own hybrid identity. Erali's sacrifice makes the cultural difference between colonisers and colonised non-negotiable. Thus reinforced, this difference between Kazakh identity and the hybrid identity that has emerged through colonization subverts Dsungar power while at the same time it hampers the construction of a sovereign Kazakh nation.

Love and the marriage between Mansur and Gaukhar symbolise the fulfilment of the promise of a Kazakh nation. This union also symbolises the creation of self-identity as an ideological construct that denies the Kazakh's cultural hybridity, i.e. their transcultural identity after generations of Dsungar colonisation.

Similar to *King Arthur*, the final battle between Dsungars and the unified Kazakhs is a fight for national liberation. Both films, *Nomad* and *King Arthur*, use the Middle Ages to explore the complex relationships between coloniser and colonised, but their intentions in doing so are quite different. *Nomad* is a nationalistic film which, by emphasising national differences between Kazakhs and Dsungars, seeks to construct a homogeneous national identity²⁴; *King Arthur* uses a similar story, but in a very different manner. The mimicry of the colonised is not removed through ritualised human sacrifice; rather it is celebrated as a postcolonial diversity of identities that forms the foundation of a superior British identity. The alliance between Woads and Sarmatians makes the defeat of the Saxons possible not in spite of their differences and hybridity, but because of them. Neither the decadence of the Roman colonisers nor the racism of the Saxons are strong enough to prevail against the legitimate rights of Woads and Sarmatians.

Arthur never rejects the old Roman virtues and consequently accepts his hybrid identity. The new British identity is an inclusive one that does not reject Roman values, ideas and achievements. Power is constructed in the hybridity of race and gender defining the story's new, transcultural British identity as postcolonial site. Guinevere is a strong woman, a warrior who does not want to play the role of

²³ H.K. Bhabha, *Signs Taken...*, op. cit., p. 49.

²⁴ The violent re-construction of a pure Kazakh identity is linked to the name of Genghis Khan, who is said to have been one of Mansur's ancestors.

a woman.²⁵ She gives up her sovereignty and creates a male saviour by marrying Arthur. Their marriage symbolises the end of long wars and the recognition of diversity as the foundation of the collective identity of a creolised society that frustrates the hegemonic desires of any single ethnic group. The wedding mirrors the alliance between two tribes from the peripheries of the Roman Empire, an alliance based on equal rights. Arthur and his fellowship find a new home in Britain. Ethical criteria determine the nature of this alliance, which Haydock calls “a triumphant celebration of ethnogenesis”.²⁶

Arthur and Guinevere are cosmopolitan Europeans who choose the place they belong of their own free will. After the fall of the Empire, they define a new political code in Britain. The imperial projects of Saxons and Romans are not pursued any longer, because the Sarmatians and Woads no longer fight amongst themselves, the Saxons and Romans can no longer pursue their respective imperial projects. They do not use racist violence, nor do they exhaust their resources in an imperial over-stretch, as the Romans have done. Moreover, they oppose the religious fundamentalism of the Church.

Neither the Saxons, nor the Romans, nor even the Church seem to have earned legitimate rule over Britain after Arthur changes the ethical norms of intervention. Arthur and his fellowship defeat all of them. Merlin leads the Woads into freedom by forging an alliance with Arthur, who liberates Guinevere and other Woads from the dungeons of fundamentalist monks. Disobeying the orders of their Roman superiors, Arthur’s fellowship intervenes to protect the (human) rights of his alleged enemies.

A year after the invasion of Iraq, some American cinema-goers saw this scene as an instance of the legitimate military intervention for the protection of human rights. Clearly, the film is coded for different groups of cinema-goers.²⁷ Fuqua’s Arthur is a postcolonial war lord: some see him as no longer wanting to fight for an imperial power, while for others he is a hero in Roman armour, taking on a fight to defend the ideals of Rome on the one hand, human rights on the other. The various reaction to *King Arthur* show that the film was produced to appeal to a wide range of political ideals among cinema-goers. The film’s meaning seems to depend on the viewer’s perspectives: either one supports the Roman Empire’s position or rejects it, acknowledging that the traditional Roman values no longer exist. A third perspective suits the ideological message of the film in a more appropriate manner: Arthur does not deny his Roman, i.e. his colonising culture, but includes it in his code of behaviour.

²⁵ Geeta Patel compares hybridity with queerness: “I want to put the seamless uniformity of heterosexuality to the test [...] by asking how it would look if it were hybrid. Queerness then becomes a way to make the center ambivalent, hybridize it, so that hybridity and queerness no longer sit in for ‘otherness,’ but, in continuity with Homi Bhabha’s injunctions, unsettle the self” (quoted in C. Dinshaw, op. cit., p. 220).

²⁶ See N. Haydock (op. cit., p. 174) for a reference to the marriage at the end of the *The Magnificent Seven* that is reminiscent of that at the end of *King Arthur*.

²⁷ Haydock calls the imperial attitude of Arthur’s intervention “the immaterial correlative of an ideology that clearly determined the world-view of George Bush upon his invasion of Iraq”. N. Haydock, op. cit., p. 179.

Arthur's attitude towards the Roman Empire is shown in a key scene at the beginning of the film which can only be found in the Director's Cut: young Arthur watches some of the imperial legionnaires passing by. His foster father tells him that, one day, he too may become a military leader, provided he lives up to the Empire's expectations:

A sacred responsibility: to protect, to defend, to value their lives above your own, and, should they perish in battle, to live your life gloriously in honour of their memory. And what of their free will? It has always fallen to a few to sacrifice for the good of many. The world is not a perfect place, but perhaps people like you, Arthur, and me, and them, can make it so.

Arthur believes in these values, and when the Empire betrays them, he rejects Rome's hegemony, still recognising his hybrid identity looking for a place where he may belong.²⁸ At the beginning of the film a voice from off-screen explains: "By 300 AD, the Roman Empire / extended from Arabia to Britain. / But they wanted more. / More land. / More peoples loyal and subservient to Rome". The narrator sees a link between greed and the over-reaching ambitions of empire, and in doing so mirrors the British historian Paul Kennedy's explanation in his influential book on *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* (1989).

After fifteen years of military service, Arthur and his fellowship look forward to going home to Sarmatia. When Bors's wife sings "We will go home across the mountains" in the style of a traditional Irish song, all the warriors get homesick. Returning home no longer seems possible. Arthur's men are neither Sarmatians nor Romans. Britain becomes a "third space", in Homi Bhabha's sense. Living in a postcolonial culture of hybridity, Britain provides a home for Arthur and his fellowship, who are neither Roman nor Sarmatian.

When ordered to rescue Alecto, his father Marius, and other Romans, Arthur turns his back on Rome. He is dismayed when he learns of the lies told to the indigenous Britons. They ask Arthur: "Is it true that Marius is a spokesman for God/ and that it's a sin to defy him?" Arthur, enraged, tells the Britons: "I tell you, now, Marius is not of God. And you, all of you, were free from your first breath!" Guinevere uses Arthur's disappointment to remind him that Sarmatians are "Britons with a Roman father". Arthur replies: "Rome is dead".

Merlin explains to Arthur why his loyalties should be with them and not with Rome: "It's a natural state of any man to want to live free in their own country". He asks Arthur: "Where do you belong, Arthur?". Merlin also reminds Arthur that his Roman foster father was married to a Briton. First Arthur does not want to support the Britons: "Your world, Merlin, not mine. I shall be in Rome". Merlin tells him: "That sword you carry is made of iron from this earth, forged in the fires of Britain. It was love of your mother that freed the sword, not hatred of me". Merlin explains to Arthur why the pulling of Excalibur from the earth "signifies

²⁸ For this reason, Jewers calls Arthur "an idealizing democrat who has identified with the positive aspects of imperial ideology, only to find himself disillusioned by a Roman version of the industrial-military complex and the compromised imperatives of politicized Christianity." C. Jewers, op. cit., p. 101.

that Arthur's legitimacy to rule comes not from Rome but from his 'feminine', Celtic side".²⁹

In quite different ways Arthur is suffering from what Jewers calls a "postcolonial stress disorder: Who is he? A lover of a sort of civilized *pax romana*, or a more earthy Brit who wants to walk on the wild side? Additionally, he has been associating with all those pagan, maverick Sarmatian. Can he overcome the loss of his mother by embracing his motherland?".³⁰ Bhabha offers the third space as a solution for those who are hybrid. This is the "cutting edge of translation and negotiation".³¹ The alliance between Woads and Sarmatians rules out any reconstruction of a lost origin. As Bhabha explains in "Third Space": "For me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'Third Space', which enables other positions to emerge".³²

While Woads and Sarmatians search for a new hybrid identity, the racist Saxons believe in ethnic "purity": "We don't mix with these people", says their leader when he insists that raping their victims is forbidden: "What kind of offspring do you think that would yield. Weak people. Half people. I will not have our Saxon blood watered down by mixing with them." In a similar fashion, liberating the Kazakhs from the Dsungar Mongols suggests that their original culture may be restored. *Nomad* was directed by a Czech and a Russian director fifteen years after the fall of Soviet Empire. Arthur was filmed in 2004 when formerly Soviet ruled Central European countries joined the European Union, turning Europe into an empire as some scholars claim.³³ The European Union is based on diversity and hybridity, while the Soviet Empire had failed making a similar promise.

King Arthur and *Nomad* tell the story of the liberation of colonised tribes. In both films the colonised have to take sides and must decide where their loyalties stand. Arthur believes in the Roman ideals of his youth, and ultimately rejects Rome in order to maintain those ideals, but not his hybrid identity. Mansur and his friend Erali personify the same alienation of the colonised from his former identity, but in a very different manner. This conflict, however, is denied and represented as a battle that the colonised must fight for themselves, because of their double identity. Erali is killed to reunify Mansur with his allegedly pure Kazakh alter ego. This solution suggests an essentialist concept of nation, the idea of a national origin which can be restored. In contrast, Woads and Sarmatians build a new world of hybrid identities. They fight the racist Saxons and do not celebrate a new nationalist rebirth. Post-Roman Britain celebrates the cosmopolitan ideal of a transnational and post-colonial Europe, the ideological centre of which migrates from the centres of the former Empires to the periphery of the colonised minorities, who embrace their hybridity.

²⁹ N. Haydock, op. cit., p. 182.

³⁰ C. Jewers, op. cit., p. 101.

³¹ H.K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, op. cit., p. 38.

³² Bhabha H.K., *The Third Space. Interview with Homi Bhabha*, [in:] *Identity. Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. J. Rutherford, London 1990, p. 2011

³³ J. Zielonka, *Europe as Empire. The Nature of the Enlarged European Union*, Oxford 2006.

The birth of the Kazakh nation is constructed as one that leads the oppressed out of the Middle Ages into Modernity. The Dsungars cannot even defeat the Kazakhs firing cannons at them. The victorious Kazakh leader gives the defeated Dsungar general a globe which shows the shape of the newly founded Kazakh territory. The medieval culture of the Kazakhs seems to have come to an end. While the eighteenth-century medievalism of the oppressed Kazakhs stands for their colonization, modernity represents national sovereignty. Both stories follow the common concept of using the Middle Ages as a point of national origins. But there is a significant difference. *Nomad* constructs national sovereignty by colonising the Middle Ages and denying the hybridity of colonised people.³⁴ King Arthur “modernises” the Middle Ages by constructing a transcultural nation that embraces hybridity and cosmopolitanism.

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³⁴ At the end of the film we realise that in 2005 the fall of the Empire of the Dsungar Mongols refers to the Soviet Union. Liberating the Kazakhs from Russian and Soviet domination is a long and painful process that creates a strong interest in a movie like *Nomad*. It is certainly no coincidence that the two directors of this film project are of Czech and Russian nationality.

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