Middle Ages *à la carte*: meanings, tensions and challenges of medievalism

Idade Média *à la carte*: sentidos, tensões e desafios do medievalismo[1]

Lidia Raquel Miranda[2]

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Abstract: In the twenty first century, we witness a widespread interest in all things medieval. However, while this rise in curiosity has contributed to an increase in the study of medievalism, it has negatively influenced the academic disciplines dedicated to the Middle Ages, mainly due to questions related to the value of this research area. In order to reflect on the meanings, tensions and challenges of medievalism, this essay begins by examining the popular images of Middle Ages, their causes and the preconceptions they involve. It goes on to consider the changing role of medievalism given the methodological transformations experienced by the discipline and the role played by contemporary scholars of the Middle Ages in our societies. Finally, it contends that the distinction between 'usefulness' and 'relevance' may be the key for Medieval Studies to remain relevant against a political and social discourse trying to discredit the knowledge and the responses/solutions that scholarship of the Middle Ages can offer to contemporary problems.
Keywords: Middle Ages; relevance; popular culture; academic culture; medievalism.

Resumo: No século XXI, testemunhamos um amplo interesse pelo medieval. No entanto, embora esse crescimento tenha contribuído para aumentar o estudo do medievalismo, influenciou negativamente as disciplinas acadêmicas dedicadas à Idade Média, principalmente devido a questões relacionadas ao valor dessa área de pesquisa. Para refletir sobre os significados, tensões e desafios do medievalismo, este ensaio começa examinando as imagens populares da Idade Média, suas causas e os preconceitos que elas envolvem. Continua a considerar a mudança do papel do medievalismo, dadas as transformações metodológicas experimentadas pela disciplina e o papel desempenhado pelos estudiosos do medievo em nossas sociedades. Finalmente, sustenta que a distinção entre 'utilidade' e 'relevância' pode ser a chave para manter os Estudos Medievais relevantes contra um discurso político e

social que tenta desacreditar o conhecimento e respostas que a área medieval pode oferecer aos problemas contemporâneos.
Palavras-chave: Idade Média; relevância; cultura popular; cultura acadêmica; medievalismo.

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Enquiries

As we know, nobody starts the formal study of any discipline from nothing. On the contrary, data or indications coming from the culture surrounding us determine our approaches.

As Bull (2005) says, studies referring to the past make their way into popular culture in various forms, which certainly have consequences for understanding history, especially since academic studies often demand a high degree of sophistication and complexity. However, although the study at the higher level provides tools to clear up errors and half-truths circulating in the public domain, it is also true that popular culture accounts for some "instinctive curiosity" (BULL, 2005, p. 7) that promotes the interest in history, literature and art. Popular culture[3] is, in short, one of the most common ways of thinking about the past, and situating ourselves in relation to it.

In the twenty first century, we witness a widespread interest in all things medieval that play a significant role in the formation of popular culture and in cultural and educational policies in general. However, while this rise in curiosity has contributed to an increase in the study of medievalism, it has negatively influenced the academic disciplines dedicated to the Middle Ages, mainly due to questions related to the reputation or applicability of this research area to solving practical problems and its socio-productive impact. This circumstance guides our reflection towards the place that the study of the Middle Ages occupies in today's world and what it should offer to contemporary society. These issues are not new problems among scholars but they remain relevant because they put on the table the relations between academic and popular culture and between present and past, and also motivate a series of questions that constitute the starting point of this paper.

The first of them is what the non-academic public knows about the Middle Ages, which images it associates with the expressions 'Middle Ages' or 'medieval', and which of them come from the scholarly sphere and which from the popular one. A second question deals with what kind of surviving evidence from Middle Ages popular culture is capable of recognizing, and what projections –that is to say, influences– it can make not only towards Europe today but also towards our closest contexts in Latin America. Finally, the third question relates to the significance of Medieval Studies concerning the Humanities and Social Sciences in educational and research institutions. That is a problem involving the notion of 'relevance' –a slippery and unsatisfactory

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concept when associated with the constricted idea of practical utility, often used to discredit Medieval Studies–, which in South American latitudes places the emphasis on formation and survival of past and present Western models of thought.[4]

In order to answer or, at least, to reflect on the three above questions, this essay begins by examining the popular images of Middle Ages, their causes and the preconceptions they involve. It goes on to consider the changing role of medievalism given the methodological transformations experienced by the discipline and the role played by medieval scholars in our societies. Finally, it contends that the distinction between 'usefulness' and 'relevance' may be the key for Medieval Studies to remain relevant against a political and social discourse trying to discredit the knowledge and responds that the medieval area can offer to contemporary problems.

Images of the Middle Ages: between what is established and what changes

If we ask different people where their ideas from the past come from, the answers would reveal a combination of many sources. Possibly, they would mention sources of an academic character, but the most likely would be those sources from popular origin: family traditions, stories for children, pictures in schools, teachers' observations, school texts, visits to museums and galleries, tourism, toys and games, novels and stories, television and movies, comics and the list could go on. This circumstance would explicitly reveal that the scholarly study of history does not exist in isolation from other ways of thinking about the past (BULL, 2005; MAGNANI *et al.*, 2019), although the connections between them are problematic and variable.

The truth is that we live surrounded by the past and we are in front of it in numerous ways:

> History, for example, is a fertile terrain for advertisers and designers. Architects can quote from the past in their plans for buildings. In the world of journalism, the ability to see the long view, that is to contextualize current affairs by looking back into the past, is regarded as a mark of judgement and depth. Museums and sites of historical interest solemnize the past but also make it part of the world of leisure and entertainment. (BULL, 2005, p.

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8-9).

A striking feature of the way that modern Western culture[5] packages the past is a taste for the eclectic mix of different periods, places, and civilizations. Numerous electronic or virtual games, for example, create worlds in which the visual key denotes the medieval but associated with technology and architecture from other times. Fantasies about witches, wizards, elves, and other characters, similar to science fiction, relate images and ideas from the past to scenarios in the future (BULL, 2005).

Our taste for the miscellaneous is understood as a symptom of the postmodern[6] condition since, having abandoned the trust in history as progress, today's culture 'plays' with the past through different combinations of facts, objects, and perspectives, freely chosen.

However, it is good to remember that putting together different parts of the past and mixing things are not recent inventions. The same type of miscellanea occurred in the ancient and medieval epic, because it narrated facts that had happened in previous centuries. Similarly, Arthurian literature of thirteenth century inspired by events that took place in the sixth century. Even the taste for lists and catalogues, according to Eco (2009), promote a kind of 'vertigo of infinity', since they bring together elements without no specific relationships. In this sense, nothing more graphic than the note that Eco includes in another of his texts:

> *Objects contained in the treasure of Charles IV of Bohemia:* the skull of St Adalbert, the sword of St Stephen, a thorn from the crown of Jesus, pieces of the Cross, tablecloth from the Last Supper, one of St Margaret's teeth, a piece of bone from St Vitalis, one of St Sophia's ribs, the chin of St Eobanus, a whale rib, an elephant tusk, Moses' rod, clothing of the Virgin. *Objects from the treasure of the Duc de Berry:* a stuffed elephant, a basilisk, manna found in the desert, a unicorn horn, a coconut, St Joseph's engagement ring. *Description of an exhibition of Pop Arte and Nouveau Réalisme*: disembowelled doll from which protrude the heads of other dolls, a pair of glasses with eyes painted on them, cross inset with Coca-Cola bottles and a lamp at the centre, multiple portrait of Marilyn Monroe, blow-up of Dick Tracy comic strip, electric chair, ping-pong table with plaster-of-Paris balls, compressed car parts, motorcyclist's helmet decorated with oil paint, electric battery

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in bronze on pedestal, box containing bottle caps, vertical table with plate, knife, packages of Gitanes and shower hanging over an oil landscape (ECO, 1985, p. 502).

The difference between the collections from one time and another shown by the quoted text lies in the fact that, in the current era, the cultural display of fragments and pieces from the past is much larger and more diverse than before.

Popular perceptions of the past may be mixed, but that does not mean that they are a complete chaos. A great selection and order underlie them: for example, various historical periods and certain places act as reference points; and not all the fragments mean the same, since some have specific meaning and others are more diffuse. According to Bull (2005), the Middle Ages falls into this second category because, unlike some other times, an unlimited range of images and associations in popular culture express its representation. Although there are strong links with medieval Europe, there is no set of associations so dominant for the general public that represents that period and that place with the clarity that a field of images does with ancient Egypt, or with Greece or with Rome.

> There are no iconic moments of discovery for the Middle Ages on a par with the finding of the Rosetta Stone,[7] which unlocked the mystery of the hieroglyphs, or the opening of Tutankhamun's tomb by Howard Carter. There is no medieval Pompeii frozen in time under volcanic ash. The Middle Ages feel closer to us in some ways, but that only makes it more difficult to see them in the round. To explore the place of the medieval period in modern popular culture, therefore, involves locating several different strands of ideas and images, not all of which fit neatly together (BULL, 2005, p. 10)[8].

There are different intellectual expressions that compare our time with the Middle Ages, either by identification or by opposition: new Middle Ages (ECO, 2004; SACCO, 2004), neo-feudal society (COLOMBO, 2004), territorial power tensions (ALBERONI, 2004), among others, are some of the comparative formulas used. Indeed, establishing analogies and metaphors is a useful way for scientific knowledge to understand and explain phenomena, both natural and social.[9]

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If this occurs in specialized domain, how much more in popular culture which, through references to the Middle Ages, finds a way to speak about aspects of modern experience. This metaphorization is a constantly carried out activity since the languages we speak and write abound in metaphors, similes and analogies: we use metaphorical statements so often on a daily basis that we have naturalized them. Its traditional use is no longer the prerogative of the literary text since it has expanded to other fields such as politics and rhetoric.

Precisely, the term 'medieval' used in cinematographic, political and media discourse is usually of metaphorical nature. Mostly it has negative connotations due to the association of the medieval with primitivism, superstition, fanaticism, fear, irrationality, superficiality, inflexibility and intolerance. This negative image has its basis in the Enlightenment's conceptions of the Middle Ages: indeed, enlightened thinkers, based on the conception of reason as humanity's progress, relegated the Middle Ages to a lower position in the historical vision. From this perspective, as Bull (2005) explains, in the Middle Ages humanity failed to realize its full potential due to barbarism and superstition. They considered institutionalized religion as the great architect of this situation, since, an extremely powerful Church with the tool of its pervasive and entrenched influence managed to protect her overbearing power by keeping people in ignorance. Besides, changes did not occur for a long time because the widespread poverty and violence were the symptoms of a flawed civilization that was unable to maintain control, according to Enlightenment intellectuals.

The professionalization of medieval history in nineteenth century happened together with the strengthening of national projects in Europe, when some representations of the past consolidated by narratives that, for many current people, are not old-fashioned but traditional and, even, definitive.

With the methodological renovation in twenty first century and mistrust in the progress of society, historians 'have attempted' against the narratives of modernity and that is why there is a *cut* between history and general public. In fact, "a significant section of the wider public have (sic) become increasingly unsettled and dissatisfied with an academic discourse that risks dissolving many of the established narratives of society's past" (JONES; KOSTICK; OSCHEMA, 2020, p. 20).

A long time has passed since eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the field of History as an academic field has achieved significant methodological and theoretical developments. However, "one unfortunate side-effect was to distance much of the historical profession from the broader public by removing

a key attribute that had made them so valuable to the nineteenth century's national projects: their ability to convey 'truth' with certainty" (JONES; KOSTICK; OSCHEMA, 2020, p. 19).

Although Western thought and culture were moving in different directions, the convictions of positivist history still exert a strong influence on current sensibilities. However, "it is important not to exaggerate the depth of the nineteenth century's fascination with the Middle Ages, and so by extension the power of its continuing influence over us today" (BULL, 2005, p. 39). This objection could partly explain why most ideas about the Middle Ages are negative in the popular culture.

Nevertheless, not all of them are bad: there are also idyllic and pleasant images, which seek to show the pernicious effects of the modern world. This idealization of the Middle Ages also emerged in the nineteenth century, fundamentally based on the idea of respect for the environment and passivity and purity of the rural environment. However, such an assessment is inappropriate because huge changes in the environment occurred in the medieval period, such as felled strips of forest, drained swamps and changed coasts[10]. It was simply the available technology –not a feeling of respect and need for contact with nature– that limited the impact of the intervention on the natural context (BULL, 2005).

Another way to describe the Middle Ages is by associating it with the category of the exotic. Exoticism gave rise to the appearance of the Gothic novel in the eighteenth century: misty fields, ruined and mysterious castles, noises of phantasmal chains, dark portents, superstitious peasants, complaining monks, torture chambers and sinister hidden passages are the sort of setting in this narrative subgenre that survive in the modern terror literature, electronic games and movies (BULL, 2005).

The revival of Middle Ages in eighteenth century was also evident in other cultural manifestations, such as poetry, painting and theatre. Nevertheless, one of the cultural areas in which it had the greatest visibility was architecture, not only with regard to construction, its means and engineering, but also due to the idea that a building contains more than the obvious. Certainly, from this perspective, buildings communicated the greatest values of society, that is to say that the aesthetic meanings of the buildings added to social and cultural values notions of spirituality and even of politics. For example, in the novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*, by Victor Hugo, published in 1831, the cathedral is central, like any other character who represents the ideals and habits of fifteenth century

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civilization. All kind of reactions throughout the world, as result of the fire that seriously affected the cathedral of Paris on April 15, 2019, reveal the symbolic meaning that it still has in our days. The notion of "places of memory" (*lieux de la mémoire*) and the pedagogical work around them to disseminate heritage from the public space (NORA, 1998) have in Paris a model followed by other European and American cities. Therefore, the reductions to ashes or ruins of monuments from the past become an object of historiographical reflection. This is so because they connect popular or not specialized vision with academic one, and allows the dialogue between medievalists and historians of the present time, which is an undeniable enrichment for the academic field, in Europe and everywhere, because it allows us to reflect on the significance and reception of events that currently involve works and objects from Middle Ages. "Bref: il y a un besoin absolu de médiévistes pour faire percevoir à ceux qui n'en sont pas la complexité et la dynamique des sociétés médiévales, encore trop souvent réduites à des images d'Épinal" (PEPKE-DURIX, 2019, p. 193).

Medieval architecture was of interest to nineteenth century thinkers because it reinforced the use of the Middle Ages as a metaphor for the social and cultural changes they wanted to see in their own day. The taste for constructing buildings in the medieval style parallels an interest in the way of life and values of the people who lived in the original Middle Ages, which includes the idea that men are more important than women and that there are people with a higher social status than others. That specific attention paid to the ideas and significances of the male aristocracy would not surprise us. This obviously refers to the chivalry code. Some texts from the eighteenth century spread the image of the medieval knight as physically brave, noble, determined, generous, loyal to his superiors, responsible to his subordinates, and considerate towards women. Chivalry seen in these positive terms had a double effect on men in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: historically anchored in the medieval past, chivalry felt as real rather than as an impossible ideal, and this made it seem particularly attractive and relevant to the aristocrats of the time and their admirers. French Revolution blew up with this class celebration. For post-revolution aristocrats, that time of chivalry, as a synonym for the Middle Ages, was a symbol of the good old days of a harmonious society that had been lost. *Ivanhoe*, from 1819, and other historical novels by Walter Scott had numerous imitators who fixed the image of the chivalrous hero in the popular mind. Bull (2005, p. 26-41) even suggests that later incarnations of the medieval knight's values, as in the cowboy and action movies, are highly indebted to Scott's vision.

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Another modern stereotype of medieval man is the savage Viking. The image of the Viking as a rapist and a looter has its origin in the middle of the nineteenth century, when academic scholarship rediscovered the sagas and other poems from Iceland. Written by monks and clerics, representative of the institutions most vulnerable to Viking raids because their churches and treasures were the best spoils, this literature presents them as the dark forces acting through barbarism and violence. For the English people, the Scandinavian invaders were *Wicingas* (Vikings, "thieves") since the attacks had allowed them to appropriate entire kingdoms and had left the eastern counties heavily plagued by colonisers.[11]

> Al cabo de varias generaciones, los descendientes de esos inmigrantes seguirían luciendo un aspecto inconfundible [...] Y a los ojos de los ingleses devotos, lo más escandaloso era su costumbre de bañarse cada sábado, un signo de afeminamiento que sorprendía especialmente por tratarse de un pueblo afamado por su brutalidad y salvajismo (HOLLAND, 2010, p. 240).

Despite this, many natives did not hesitate to adopt their habits, which gave impetus to integration between both peoples. The fact that foreigners were already Christianized and had laws and some customs akin to those of the English, also contributed to it. Modern archaeology, moreover, has shown that the Vikings lived immersed in a complex trading network that discredits the most widespread image and supports a more domestic and less violent view of medieval Scandinavians (BULL, 2005; HOLLAND, 2010).

The various Viking representations are a good demonstration of how the relationships between popular and academic visions of the medieval past constantly redefine. The academic perspective, which is more dynamic, helps to understand that the Middle Ages were 'invented' as a cultural phenomenon, mainly in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and to know the ways in which it is permanently rebuilt (BULL, 2005).

Undoubtedly, all these visions of the medieval we have mentioned based on a memory built by a historical account that responds to the social and political demands of another era. However, it is possible that they still are in force because they respond to current social demands at a time when there is much degradation of the environment and diseases that threaten the living, as well as instances of conservation and patrimonialization of past vestiges leading

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to reinterpret the notion of historical time. These relationships between past and present do not always have results that critically confront the legacy of the past and the projects: in this dialectic, archaeologists and specialists in written documents have in their hands the urgent task of formulating the answers that satisfy the social dynamics around territorial planning, cultural policies and inheritances of the past. In sum, as suggested: "Il faut éviter l'appropriation de l'histoire par des non-historiens" (BURNOUF *et al.*, 2019, p. 97) in order to mediate in the tension between contemporary needs and the apparently distant area of Medieval Studies.

Medievalism in debate

According to Sanmartín Bastida (2004), we can understand the term 'medievalism' in three ways: the study of the Middle Ages, the enforcement of medieval models to contemporary needs, and art and thought forms inspired in the Middle Ages. New Medievalism is the type of medievalism recently prevailing in the Humanities, according to the first meaning of the word above mentioned.

The author also maintains that this proposal, originally dealt with literary and historical medieval models, has been rightly extended to other studies that address a wide range of cultural achievements (politics, music, religion), which explains the reason because medievalism is not only the prerogative of the academic research. In this way, knowledge of medievalism is carried out from an interdisciplinary perspective, "cuyo éxito dependerá de que los historiadores se sensibilicen respecto al funcionamiento interno del arte y los estudiosos de la literatura observen el marco social de las realizaciones estéticas" (SANMARTÍN BASTIDA, 2004, p. 230).

Thinking about medievalism is a good way to appreciate the complexity of the Middle Ages. It is also good to keep in mind that popular culture clichés and stereotypes are not necessarily mistaken. Even when they usually distort reality, must be highly selective in order to work, and are always extremely simplifying, an

> appreciation of the liberties that popular culture takes with the Middle Ages, [...], is a way of being forewarned and forearmed to be sceptical about all those other generalizations and truisms, the ones which seem to come with a scholarly stamp of approval

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As emerges from the previous paragraphs, medievalism is proposed as a project to study the way the perception and depiction of the Middle Ages developed in different times and cultures and how its models were applied and conceived in art, literature or history. The current proposals of medievalism are also consistent with the revision of the methodological assumptions of postmodernism, since it is essential today to renew some parameters of thought considered fundamental in past times. For this reason, the debate around shared notions about the Middle Ages is necessary and requires an inescapable starting point: to establish the conceptual scope of the expression 'Middle Ages', a cultural and historical construction inherited from the evaluations that preceded us in time.

As we know, the notion of the Middle Ages is a chronological convention originated in humanist thought. Starting from the rediscovery and study of the classics, they formed the idea of an interval of many centuries 'in the middle', between the culture of the ancients and the culture of their present moment. Therefore, to define the concept of the Middle Ages, the simplest way has always been to compare it with the later movement, the Renaissance. The curious thing is that, in fact, until well into the nineteenth century, neither 'Middle Ages' nor 'Renaissance' were common denominations in the European world and the idea that the medieval period was a continuation of the ancient world was extinguished very slowly. In nineteenth century, the name 'Middle Ages' began to replace that of 'Gothic', although this replacement was not homogeneous in all countries. The opposition of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as we understand it today, is mainly due to the publication in 1860 of Jakob Burckhardt's book *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien: ein Versuch* (SANMARTÍN BASTIDA, 2004).

Historical periodization is quite recent. It makes difficult to delimit the field of medievalism from the terminological point of view, even more if we want to put aside the easy resource of presenting the Middle Ages as clearly opposed to the Renaissance.

In addition to the establishment of when the Middle Ages began and ended, the chronological problem extends to other questions, such as when the interest in the middle centuries and the recognition of its specificity began in Europe (SANMARTÍN BASTIDA, 2004; SERGI, 2001).

What is evident is that our mental habits often prevent us from distancing

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ourselves from the premises established and received from previous epochs, especially from the nineteenth century.

The basis of the problem of the defining the Middle Ages seems to reside in the chronological and geographical set of what is normally included in the label of 'medieval'. 'Middle Ages' is a practically unmanageable name, so general culture often simplifies the characterization of the period in the idea of 'feudalism', which corresponds, in fact, to a few centuries of the long period of a thousand years, a term that, in addition, is usually used with the meanings of modernity and not with the original meaning (BULL, 2005).

Related to this problem are the current demands on the historian of the Middle Ages. Genet (2019) considers that it is necessary to return to the notion of the Middle Ages and ask ourselves if it still has a certain utility. If the historian's task is mainly to devote himself to time and the social production of change, the problem of periodization and the extension of periods come to the fore and with them the analytical and heuristic value of the two cuts that delimit the Middle Ages, today rather questioned than confirmed. On the side of the High Middle Ages, historians today increasingly place themselves in the prolongation of the history of late Antiquity and rescue the influence of Rome in the conformation of Latin Europe. For the other side, the new limit is the French Revolution. This chronological relocation of medievalists determine that medieval history is methodologically comparative. Then, the medievalist will be the one who, focusing his work on the chronological heart of the Middle Ages, will share and therefore collaborate with the Antiquity scholars and with the modernists. But "médiévistes disparaîtraient sans laisser de traces si, par malheur, ils se réfugiaent dans un statut de spécialistes qui ne ferait qu'exposer cruellement leurs déficiences et s'ils refusaient le double défi du comparatisme et du long terme" (GENET, 2019, p. 25).

Perhaps there are no unanimous views on this issue and it is more comfortable to keep the names that tradition has handed down to us. However, the task of both intellectuals and historians is to continue mobilizing the debate around the period that forged Western man and that is the matrix of our present.

The challenges of relevance

Societies need the past to anchor themselves in the present and project themselves into the future they desire. From this point of view, the contemporary question about relationships between history writing and cultural, ideological,

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political and sociological models –whether explicit or implicit– is not something new. In fact, in the Middle Ages, the told stories always linked with particular dynasties or people distant in time; or, much earlier, Christianity took advantage of the entire institutional past of Judaism, narrated in the Old Testament, to establish and legitimize its own recent history, told in the New Testament.

The way in which the past was perceived in past societies and the authority granted to that past interrogates Medieval Studies about our contemporary society, paradoxically leaned towards denying the influence of the past, if it is not the nearest. For this reason, frequently the 'relevance' of Medieval Studies is mistrusted, and we highlight the term 'relevance' since it is a subtle choice that most of the time hides a restrictive idea about the 'usefulness' that superior studies should have, supported by the eminently practical effects of some of the other academic fields.

> The failure of scholars to bridge that growing chasm contributes to the popular impression that modern research in Medieval Studies –but also more generally in the Humanities and sometimes also the Social Sciences– are essentially 'useless' to society in general (JONES; KOSTICK; OSCHEMA, 2020, p. 22).

Undoubtedly, medievalism must face an increasingly demanding social request that, in addition to including the training of students and researchers, must also reach a wider and open public about the world, curious of a Middle Ages that not always conform to which we studied in the college classrooms.

For this reason, the responses of the medievalists to the approaches centred on 'use' are many, not all entirely convincing. For example, they hold that the past itself is a resource with social and economic dimensions. In European countries, this argument is quite solid: tourism and the associated industries employ many people and, furthermore, they are a source of income money from abroad.[12] General public demands call for adequate responses to expectations, so there must be a connection between the means of investigation and the techniques of tourism, which also shows that the medievalists do not constitute an elite locked in a ivory tower, disconnected from the current and real world, nor mere "des intrus donneurs de leçons" (PEPKE-DURIX, 2019, p. 193).

Nonetheless, the tourism argument fails when it refers to countries where there is no medieval history, like non-European ones. In Latin America the

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impact of medievalism occurs almost exclusively in the field of higher education and academic research, and even there the discipline faces prejudice and lack of recognition that delegitimize the historian of the Middle Ages task. Magnani *et al*. (2019) have registered in Latin American countries two opposite attitudes towards Medieval Studies. On the one hand, there is an idea that Western heritage has determined our countries identity, that is to say that Middle Ages history serves as long as it is useful for understanding the colonial past of our societies. On the other, there is a confrontation with the strange, unknown, and different Middle Ages, which implies a kind of "exercise in otherness". These two ways of apprehending medievalism in Latin America show an extension of the deeper and more general problem underlying the discipline: the antagonism, both in popular and scholarly culture, between a vision of medievalism as an autonomous field of knowledge and another that necessarily conceives it if it has a practical utility.

Another argument affirms that the study of the Middle Ages has an intangible value, like all areas of the Humanities; but this idea that Medieval Studies are part of our collective soul seems more like a desire than a clearly observable effect. Contemporary societies demand answers to their current problems from historians, therefore, in the case of medievalism, what interest them are answers to the question of identity in a tangible sense (OSCHEMA, 2019).

Certainly, the crux of the matter lies in the 'vulnerability' that certain academic specialty areas (such as Medieval Studies, Classical Studies, Philosophy, Arts and Culture) face in the debate about the academic value in modern society, a debate that, strictly speaking, has been in force for several years.

The most common attack refers to how distant in time –and for Americans, also in space– the Middle Ages are in order to provide valuable samples of how the past and the present are interconnected: why, then, reflect about such a distant time if our real contemporary problems are elsewhere? This perspective lacks scientific support because the objective of the study of history is not to establish mechanical cause-consequence relationships that explain the current world, reason with which even historians of the present time agree (BULL, 2005), rather the centre of historian's work is time and the social production of change (GENET, 2019). For Oschema (2019), medievalism in the twenty first century is essential for "security reasons". Indeed, the reflections of the medievalists are important for contemporary societies because they provide an effective means of counteracting the misuses of history that exist to some degree everywhere, especially in some political arguments of our time. The author

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bases his position through a meticulous analysis of the ideological burden that different discourses on the notion of Europe have had and concludes with a clear definition: "Ma réponse vise donc à une vocation politique de l'histoire qui se veut délibérément apolitique" (OSCHEMA, 2019, p. 31). This viewpoint is particularly useful for South American case because representations of idealized Middle Ages, guided by contemporary social demands, plus the little time devoted to medieval history at school education, do not stimulate an informed approach to the period, and leave all the remaining space to the clichés spread by the media and the ideological manipulation that comes from it (MAGNANI *et al.*, 2019). More than ever, medievalism knowledge must be at the service of training responsible citizens.

Another perspective against medievalism, especially as a study of the Middle Ages, maintains that it is the "relic of an old-fashioned, Eurocentric historical vision" (BULL, 2005, p. 107). In other words, medievalism, like Classical Studies, bears not only the irrelevant nickname for its chronological remoteness but also for its (supposed) ideological conservatism. That kind of affirmations show a clear ignorance of the advances and methodological changes in the discipline –parallel to those of the other scientific fields not only in the Humanities–, and the lack of critical distance on thinking that political orientation may be justifiable or necessary to ensure the social relevance of our discipline (OSCHEMA, 2019).

In this sense, Miranda (2006) poses the challenge of maintaining the relevance of the object of study in our local academic contexts without losing sight of the fact that we address our contemporaries and, therefore, play a role in the intellectual life of our own societies and cultures. The possibility of generating renewed academic approaches within the limits of traditional and secular fields of study means a way of expanding the field of work and promoting a space of production and cultural training. Thus, resorting to old and new instruments will give us the possibility of finding a different way of understanding –of understanding once more– our object of study, which represents the opportunity to give a new disposition to the task of reading, reflection and production of knowledge about the world of the past within the framework of our contemporary cultural and social interests.

But there is no doubt that the issue of 'relevance' bears hard on the choice of which disciplines to study, which books to publish or which degrees are convenient for universities and other educational institutions to offer. Therefore, it is not wrong to be defensive and develop arguments in favour of

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the importance of Medieval Studies as an academic field. Bull (2005) argues that the best course of action is to start the discussion avoiding extreme generalizations and instead trying to focus on specific examples of how what happened in the Middle Ages still affects us.

To develop this argument, the aforementioned author chooses the case of the English language. He thinks that, in addition to the fact that teaching language and literature is part of the academic programs of universities, language is a clue to observe how individuals and groups function culturally, socially, politically and ideologically, feature that makes it a subject of historical research. Furthermore, language can provide evidence of many historical processes that had repercussions beyond the specifically linguistic domain, for example in the transformations of social models, in political crises, in technological developments, in educational reforms, in migrations and in colonial encounters between different people. "A great deal of history, in other words, has left its mark on our language" (BULL, 2005, p. 108).

Languages, as we know, are the result of long mutations and the development of the chronologies of European languages follows various paths. In thinking about the relevance of the Middle Ages to the English language, Bull (2005) takes into account how much history has passed since fifteenth century, which allows him to assess it on a convenient scale. In 1500, English belonged to a group of dialects spoken by probably less than 3 million people (in fact, population density had declined in fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as result of plagues and famines).The language was limited to the British Islands and was only one of the languages spoken in the different parts of the archipelago. We cannot deny that English was the most important language of the most populous and politically powerful entity in the British Islands, but it had not extended outside this small area. By the year 2000, however, English had become a truly global phenomenon. It is the first language of around 350 million speakers, and is understood and used by a similar number of people. It is probable that around 1 billion people around the world study English, at different levels. The extraordinary expansion and diversification of the language have many complex causes but the point of tension is that these developments cannot be comprehended without considering the situation that English had in the year 1500.

Miranda (2014), Miranda (2015) and Lell (2015) make use of the argumentative model proposed by Bull and replicate it in our latitudes. Those texts review, respectively, the history of the Spanish language, with emphasis on the

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interrelation of linguistic phenomena with the social and cultural framework and its consequences in American Spanish, and the legal and philosophical institutions of the Middle Ages that have had and are having effects on Hispanic and Argentine legal thought. In both cases, without the convenient handling of what concerns these areas of study in the Middle Ages, it is impossible to understand and justify many of their current characteristics.

Another interesting contribution by Bull refers to the "imperative of presentism" present in the debate on relevance that has an impact on some words, such as the case of the term 'crusade' and its different meanings already in the Middle Ages and in the current times (BULL, 2005, p. 120-131). From this approach, the author arrives to the problem of otherness. What does otherness mean in the Middle Ages? Undoubtedly, this question involves no one but many kinds of otherness, found at the social, political, economic and cultural levels. The gallery of marginalized or dissident characters[13] that populate the pages of medieval works corroborates this. Despite the topicality and validity of the problems of marginality and conflict between different identities in present societies, the inclusion of the subject in historiography is quite recent. Todorov (1995) promoted the studies of the otherness, in a perspective for which discourse, whether historical or literary, constitutes the most relevant factor for the construction and representation of other identities, which contributes to historiography and understanding past and present societies' configuration. Knowledge on the construction processes of the other in the Middle Ages offers conceptual tools to appreciate an anthropological and sociological facet of the medieval world but, from an integral perspective, it allows a critical and informed approach to current problems around the questions of other identities, since

> la alteridad posee historicidad, [...] las diferencias no deben ser soslayadas, sino enfatizadas en función de respetar la diversidad que ha adquirido el mundo contemporáneo. El conocimiento de este proceso resulta esencial para estimular formas de convivencia que amplíen el círculo de la participación en las más diversas instancias de las relaciones socio-culturales (CANTERA, 2020, p. 18).

The problem of identity and otherness is one of several approaches in which medievalism can answer contemporary questions and even provide solutions to current problems. It is proof, given the impossibility to offer a complete

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list in this work, that there are areas in which Medieval Studies are or may be relevant to our societies.

> We believe that not only does the medieval remain relevant but that its relevance is to be found in some surprising places. [There is] a series of powerful case studies that demonstrate the way in which Medieval Studies can contribute solutions to urgent challenges. These challenges include two of the greatest faced by our species: the threat posed by anti-microbial resistance to drug treatments and the impact of climate change. At the same time, [the contribution] to informing contemporary political and social discourse (JONES; KOSTICK; OSCHEMA, 2020, p. 6).

Conclusions

Collective images, as we have seen, drag and redefine those of previous times and, as regards the Middle Ages, both popular and academic culture are dependent on ideological and aesthetic prejudices rooted in numerous mediations. It is therefore necessary for medievalists to try to avoid any ahistorical and uncritical approach, since the depictions of the Middle Ages emerge in a space of complicated interrelations, in a dynamic of change in which aesthetic aspects mixed with political, cultural and social ones.

The influence of images, concepts and ideas that, rightly or wrongly, are identified with the Middle Ages have the power to transmit representations that shape the attitudes and beliefs of their audiences in today's world, which often involve paradoxes, contradictions and ideological conflicts.

In the preceding pages, we have tried to mark some ways in which popular culture is interested in the Middle Ages and how they affect the academic field. Hence, we have tried to demonstrate how experience in the field of Medieval Studies is still important for contemporary society.

> The case is worth making, in part, because there is a real danger that a popular enthusiasm for medievalism may obscure the distinction between the 'real' Middle Ages and modern fantasy, whether the latter is considered dangerous or merely diverting. The potential problem is compounded by the internet, which, while laudably enabling an unprecedented democratization of access to knowledge (in spite of all the barriers that continue to

exist), has also removed much of the traditional quality assurance performed by publishers via the process of academic peer review. Professional scholars, and not just those of the Middle Ages, find themselves in increasing danger of being marginalized as irrelevant in a world where few among the wider public see any issue with the primary point of access for an understanding of the past being Wikipedia (JONES; KOSTICK; OSCHEMA, 2020, p. 3).

Imperatives of utility, economy, and impact on the socio-productive sector generally dominate current debates. Thus, it is unavoidable to be on the watch for utilitarian policies not undermine the ability to think critically and promote the creation of "economically productive automata with predictable voting habits", because we know that such policies are in fact a danger to democracy (JONES; KOSTICK; OSCHEMA, 2020, p. 14). In this sense, we must consider the entire field of Humanities as an important basis for the formation of mature citizens capable of participating competently in modern democracies.

Even if we agreed to think of medievalism as a relevant field but without practical utility, we could not admit that it exists in a complete disconnection between the real world and the academy. Although that of medievalist is not a scientific category, it is an academic one and, therefore, it is a social category (GENET, 2019), committed to a wide range of problem areas in our societies.

In short, it is auspicious that the general public is interested in the Middle Ages and expects responses from the academic field that other areas of expertise cannot provide. However, medievalists should not give in to demands for simple or unambiguous answers, because this would imply a setback in the scientific spirit that advances in the discipline have achieved in recent decades. Can medievalism reduce the gap between the Middle Ages and contemporary societies? Undoubtedly it can, but on condition that the images and demands are placed in a broad perspective, allowing them to be associated with objects, practices and modes of communication with specific anthropological implications.

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Notas

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[2] Researcher at CONICET (Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas) and Professor at Facultad de Ciencias Humanas, Universidad Nacional de La Pampa (Argentina). PhD (field: Literature and Linguistics); Postdoctoral degree (field: Social Sciences); Specialist and Magister on Social and Cultural Studies; Magister on Spanish Literature History; Professor and Licenciate (field: Literature and Linguistics).

[3] The expression 'popular culture' is useful but it certainly is a simplification since it encompasses a great variety of perspectives and degrees of complexity in terms of manifestations and cultural baggage. In order to problematize the concept see Grignon & Passeron (1991), de Certeau (1999) and García Canclini (2010), among other authors.

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[4]An example of these models of thought can be found in the study of rhetoric, based on a turn towards the origins of the discipline and its developments in the Middle Ages but including modern advances in communication, literature, semiotics, linguistics and philosophy.

[5]The idea of Western culture includes multiple manifestations, from its origins in Antiquity to the present day, which can be approached through philological, literary and historical knowledge. It is a complex conceptualization that, despite its coherence, is not without internal contradictions. To deepen its study through examples from different historical periods, see Ferrari & Miranda (2012).

[6]The term 'postmodernity' encompasses a wide range of artistic, cultural, literary, and philosophical movements emerged from the second half of the twentieth century, which extend to the present day, characterized to varying degrees by opposition or overcoming the interests of the Age Modern. Although applied to very diverse currents, all of them share the idea that modernity failed in its effort to radically renew the traditional forms of art and culture, thought and social life. For an analysis of the complexity of the definition and characteristics of postmodernity, see Díaz (1999).

[7]As we know, the Rosetta Stone is a fragment of an ancient Egyptian slab with the text of a decree, published in Memphis in 196 BC, which appears in three different scriptures: the upper text in hieroglyphs; the middle one in demotic and the lower one in Greek. The comparison of the three inscriptions made it possible to understand the Egyptian hieroglyphs. It is houses in the British Museum in London, where there is also a replica at whose foot it says: "The Rosetta Stone. This is a modern copy displayed as it was when it first came to the British Museum. PLEASE TOUCH. The original is in Room 4. " Undoubtedly both the replica and the text reflect the general public affection for 'being in contact' with the remains of past times, and promote a kind of fetishism in popular culture.

[8]It is necessary to keep in mind, however, that even though there is nothing like Pompeii for the Middle Ages, there are numerous historical cities to be visited: tourism as emphasised below and also experimental archaeology have been growing in the academic and non-academic spheres.

[9]According to Palma (2015), the use of metaphors does not obey a logic outside of knowledge and, therefore, knowledge and metaphors are not disconnected spheres. For this author, metaphors used by scientific fields say something by themselves and are not mere subsidiaries of other expressions considered literal and, then, have a legitimate and irreplaceable cognitive and epistemic function.

[10]Burnouf, Beck and Bailly-Maître reflect on the medieval society interactions with the valleys, with the biodiversity of waters and forests and with mining activity, respectively (BURNOUF *et al.*, 2019).

[11]The Old Norse form *viking* is usually explained as meaning properly "one who came from the fjords", from *vik* 'creek, inlet, small bay'. In that language, *viking* also meant "freebooting voyage, piracy". But Old English *wicing* and Old Frisian *wizing* are almost 300 years older than the earliest attestation of the Old Norse word, and probably derive from *wic* 'village, camp' (large temporary camps were a feature of the Viking raids), related to Latin *vicus* 'village, habitation'. The connection between the Norse and Old English words is still much debated.

[12]However, not always is true that it is easy or easier to European academics to make the point of the relevance of studying the Middle Ages due to tourism. There are countries that historical medieval places do not receive from authorities the investment deserved, and, also, where academic positions for Medieval Studies and Celtic studies are being extinct or surviving at hard costs.

[13]Marginal people are those who –even when they belong to or participate in a social group– do not identified with the totality of the guidelines and norms of that society, those who do not respond to the model that it is given. They are the accepted ones or those who accept a society in a partial way. The issue of marginality is a theoretical research problem, because the concept engages in dialogue with other scholar labels to refer to individuals and groups straying from social guidelines.

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