

Call for Papers for the Conference ‘Mittelalterlichkeit/Medievalitas: Creating, Perceiving and Evaluating Authenticity in 21st Century Fantasy Media’

Date:

24th-26th June 2027

Organisers:

Dr. Theresa Specht und Prof. Dr. Hans Rudolf Velten

Place/Institution:

University of Siegen (Germany); Cooperative Research Centre 1472 ‘Transformations of the Popular’
[Project B04 ‘Popular Middle Ages. Narratives and Inventories in Fantasy Media’](#)

As part of the Cooperative Research Centre 1472 ‘Transformations of the Popular’ (funded by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) the project ‘Popular Middle Ages. Narratives and Inventories in Fantasy Media’ asks in which ways modern fantasy – starting with J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* – adapts and transforms medieval narratives, motifs and inventories. In doing so, the project takes on a (neo)medievalist approach and is currently focused on transmedia expansion and the visualisation of worldbuilding in text and motion picture. The neomedieval (i.e. being somehow ‘medieval-like’) story-worlds created in fantasy novels, films, series and video games are popular on a global scale. Since they are noticed by many, they shape the popular imagination of the Middle Ages.

The initial question of the conference is: How can fantasy’s reference to the Middle Ages be analysed in an adequate way? It is obvious that the genre is not interested in depicting the Middle Ages as an historic period. Therefore, approaches investigating fantasy’s scientific and historical accuracy must fail. Also, diagnosing only vague similarities between the secondary worlds of fantasy media and the Middle Ages is not sufficient. In contrast, the depicted worlds of recent fantasy productions create an impression of authenticity by adapting and visualising medieval culture and literature: „[T]hey create worlds which feel authentic to their audiences“ (Houghton/Alvestad 2021, p. 4). To target these special ways and means of referring to the Middle Ages, we propose the concept of *medievalitas* (‘Mittelalterlichkeit’ in German):

Mittelalterlichkeit operates with stereotypes, archetypes and iconic pictures from the Middle Ages [...]. Some of these medievalist stereotypes and archetypes that are already part of the popular imagination of a certain time and society – and get disseminated on across Western culture and/or the globe – shape recipient’s expectations and knowledge of the – indeed – popular Middle Ages.
(Velten/Specht 2024, p. 13)

In using such well-known stereotypes, pictures and motifs, fantasy provides its storyworlds with authenticity. This does not mean scientific accuracy or authorization. Rather, we share Pamela Clement’s understanding of „authenticity as believability and verisimilitude“ (Clements 2022, p. 19) which has gained more and more attention in recent research (cf. Elliott 2010, p. 214–217; Houghton/Alvestad 2021, p. 1–11; Clements 2021; Utz 2022, Velten/Specht 2024, p. 10–14; Larrington/Velten/Young 2026, p. 1–12). Barely provable by scientific methods, authenticity can rather be characterised in its affective dimension. It is a phenomenon of popular culture that is rooted in production as well as in reception. The result of these processes is *medievalitas*/*Mittelalterlichkeit*.

Still, there are various opinions on what is rendered as authentic by recipients and how these ascriptions are legitimised. Nevertheless, some motifs,

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visualisations and inventories prove to be persistent: they constitute an inter-subjective frame of reference and contribute to the ‘branding’ of the popular Middle Ages, as Richard Utz observes: ‘Inversely, even when a (nonhistorical) fantasy narrative displays enough brand features, such as swords, knights, castles, and jousts, it will automatically be categorized as “medieval”’ (Utz 2022).

Popularity plays a decisive role in this development because only few fantasy novels, films, series and games get noticed by many (Döring et al. 2021). The neomedieval pictures, archetypes and figurations presented in those productions are disseminated on a global scale and thereby shape the genre of fantasy:

Thus, authenticity does not refer to plausible reconstructions of historical pasts but is strives to be as congruent with recipient’s expectations as possible, the later being significantly influenced by productions that became popular. (Velten/Specht, p. 11)

Using the concepts of *medievalitas*/*Mittelalterlichkeit*, authenticity and popularity, this conference aims to investigate the specific ways in which modern fantasy refers to medieval literature and culture. Examining popular novel series, TV series, films and (video) games, it should be analysed how fantasy – despite its ahistoricism – contributes to the contemporary imagination of the Middle Ages in popular culture and shapes the medieval as a brand (Utz 2022). This approach should also serve to reflect on how on the functions and effects of these references for contemporary societies.

Possible topics and aspects:

- Relation of authenticity/*medievalitas* to scientific or historic accuracy (cf. Houghton/Alvestad 2021, S. 1–11)
- Specific stereotypical images, motifs or figures, their popularisation and persistence
- Seriality and worldbuilding
- Movement of stereotypes across the genre and in transmedia expansion processes
- Branding ‘the Medieval’ in popular culture (cf. Utz 2022)
- Repercussions on the genre
- Authentication strategies in the production of fantasy in popular culture (e.g. in marketing)
- Perceiving and evaluating authenticity in the reception (e.g. in fandoms or on social media)
- Authenticity as argument in political appropriation of fantasy (especially in the context of recent race and gender discourses; see Kaufman 2022, Young/Mudan Finn 2022)

We are welcoming talks that examine specific fantasy productions with a focus on the topics mentioned above or those that provide a broader analysis of those topics.

Abstracts (500–700 words; in English or German) can be send to the following address until the 20th of August:

mittelalterlichkeit@sfb1472.uni-siegen.de

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- Elliott, Andrew B.R.: *Remaking the Middle Ages. The Methods of Cinemas and History in Portraying the Medieval World*. Jefferson 2011.
- Houghton, Robert/Alvestad, Karl: Introduction. Accuracy and authenticity – interactions in contemporary medievalism. In: *The Middle Ages in Modern Culture. History and Authenticity in Contemporary Medievalism*. Ed. by Robert Houghton and Karl Alvestad. London 2021, pp. 1–11.
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- Larrington, Carolyne/Velten, Hans Rudolf/Young, Helen: Introduction: Popularising the Middle Ages. In: *Popularising the Middle Ages in Modern Fantasy. Neomedievalism, Video Games, and Vikings*. Ed. by Carolyne Larrington, Hans Rudolf Velten and Helen Young. Cambridge 2026, pp. 1–12.
- Utz, Richard: Medieval: The Movie, The Brand. In: *medievalists.net* 2022. Online abrufbar unter: <https://www.medievalists.net/2022/09/medieval-movie-brand/> [access date 15 June, 2026].
- Velten, Hans Rudolf/Speccht, Theresa: Das Mittelalter in der Populärkultur – zwischen Stereotypen und Authentizität. In: *Mittelalter und Populärkultur. Rezeption – Aneignung – Beachtung*. Ed. by Hans Rudolf Velten und Theresa Speccht. Bielefeld 2024, pp. 9–22.
- Young, Helen/Mudan Finn, Kavita: *Global Medievalism. An Introduction*. Cambridge 2022.