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DYSTOPIAS AND HISTORIOGRAPHICAL OBJECTS: THE STRANGE CASE OF THE MIDDLE AGES

Abstract

The article offers a critical reflection on the distance that separates us from an objectification of memory, its historiographical reconstructions and their different targets. At the basis of this enterprise, lies the belief that grasping the nuances and unveiling the ideological mechanisms of narrative reconstructions amounts to critically reflecting on the conditions that enable the narrative objectifications of the past filtered through by memory. To verify this theoretical assumption, the article elaborates on two key research tools that Umberto Eco has employed throughout his life and that permeated his overall work, i.e. the categories of use and interpretation, and applies them to the treatment of the Middle Ages as a historiographical object, to show how medievalism can be an interpretive tool that allows understanding the contemporary age and its hermeneutic and ideological distortions, its fears, its media representations.

Invisible Cities

Strange as it might seem, among the «invisible cities» most infected by dystopias and heterotopias there is a historiographical object: the Middle Ages.¹ According to a prejudice that has now become commonplace, when something

¹ Needless to say, we owe the literary reference to “Invisible Cities” as *eterotopias* to Italo Calvino’s novel, *Le città invisibili*: Cf. Calvino 2012: «Non di questo è fatta la città, ma di relazioni tra le misure del suo spazio e gli avvenimenti del suo passato». For the Middle Ages as an «invisible city» see Glauco Cantarella, in Cantarella 2002: 9-10. Contemporary inability to provide answers to social fears dictated by the uncertainty of the present, cancellation of social memory and lack of control over the future, takes the form of narrative extensions such as dystopias, heterotopias and retrotopias. These narrative genres are extended into the spatial, temporal and local dimensions of a familiar elsewhere, consolatory if not absolute. They have the common characteristic of being within a domestic proximity and, at the same time, sufficiently distant from the point of view of rhetorical rendering (in particular through metaphors and spatial allegories) with which we project out of ourselves feelings such as social fears, objectifying them, controlling and using them. See Foucault 2008: 11-28. See also Eco 1976.

is considered immoral, inhuman or backward, the media tend to label it as a regression to a medieval past, or even to a medieval future. «Dark ages», as they say – which however never existed, or that, in any case, were neither darker nor brighter than any other time. From this point of view, the Middle Ages possess «very medieval» properties – which thus confirm all of our negative predictions –, since they are artificially created within the circle of biases that link the memory of the past to popular representations (darkness, crises, stakes, castles, wizards, tales, claustrophobic environments, bigotry, anti-science, warriors, crusaders, anti-Semitism, *Blut und Bloden* etc.).

As a matter of fact, this attitude towards the Middle Ages has much more in common with the way the media artfully create beliefs and testimonies to build consensus and to control dissent than with the Middle Ages itself.² When faced with these arguments, we may simply deny them, labelling them as mere ignorance of a supposed objectivity reconstructed by scholarly studies; or – and this is what I will try to do in this paper – we can try to critically dismantle the structures of their narratives and unveil the mechanisms by which spontaneous ideologies and prejudices function and disseminate. This operation allows shedding light on that «middle earth» that occupies the ground between the alleged factual objectivity of the documents examined by scientific/academic research, and the relationships we entertain with our representations of the past and the passions they conjure up or exorcise.

Middle Age as Social Representation?

Many of our social representations derive from narrative constructions through which we access and filter the otherness of a past we feel emotionally connected to. The Middle Ages is a prime example of this: we inhabit its cities; we pray in its churches; we feed, with often disastrous consequences, on myths and narrative rites about it (from novels to TV series to the gloomiest political and ideological epiphanies), which reveal nothing but what we have already established the Middle Ages must be.³

However obvious, it is worth remembering here that our civilization, just as the medieval one, is the result of the ways in which it presents itself as well as those in which it represents itself. One could then say that medievalism is not entirely useless but serves in short the understanding of what medieval is not, but rather is related to the emotions that connect us to the use of our modern reception of the Middle Ages. The centuries that we conventionally call medieval are categorized in partitions and units typically medieval around certain

² Cf. De Rijk 1995: 33; Zumthor 1990: 153.

³ Cf. Fedriga 2017: 127-131.

characteristics that someone else (living in another era or based on another “...ism”) has declared and chosen as pertinent and significant to designate in a unitary way a millenary civilization. Justifying, thus, the existence of their own time, as well as the ways of representing it, compared to the past.

Let us consider, for example, the case of periodization of historiographical objects, i.e. categories within which we classify historical objects (e.g. events but also interpretations) by recording them in inscription acts on different devices. Among the infinite examples of ideological use that can be made in this regard, the most pertinent one concerns a Middle Ages spatially and essentially divided into High, Central and Low – where the measurements correspond to scales of moral values. Or, starting from the presumed perennality of a historiographical category such as “scholasticism”, we speak of pre-scholastic, scholastic (13th century, by some even defined as the “classical age” of the Middle Ages) and late scholasticism – which, unlike late antiquity, is associated with a judgment of decadence, intellectual and moral, and a nominalist relativism, typical of the 14th century.

Shadow Histories

Although historical evidence denies these metaphysical assumptions, they are so deeply rooted in common feeling, in literature, in cinema, in school textbooks, that they are difficult to eradicate (even in historians themselves). In this sense it is extremely important to be able to recognize the relevance of one (or more) “shadow histories” with a such performative function that also affects the work of historians.

In order for the periodization to have a solid meaning, roles and peculiarities are constructed for the temporal period in question. They are then associated with properties essential to each partition, starting from the attribute par excellence with which the middle age is connoted: the dark ages. To then forget about the consequences, and connote, for instance, the thirteenth century as the “classical age” of these dark centuries. But then, either it makes no sense to subdivide the Middle Ages into typologies, or the historians cannot really see the classic period of the dark centuries, if not as a darkness darker than darkness. Unless they have already decided that the 13th century is, for ideological and theological but not historical reasons, the classical age of a very medieval millennium.

Not only that. In these times of upsurges of Neo-Guelphic nationalism, this attitude toward the past reveals a dangerous bias: it is a dislocation founded on the current historicity regime that presents itself as capable of providing answers to the supposed cultural relativism of our times. They say: fear not, there is no resentment! When we wish for the return to the monism of medieval thought,

they say, we understand it solely as retrieval of Christian values, and as the monolithic unity of a millennium-old faith (which was in fact all but monolithic).⁴

Let us think of the case of Joseph Ratzinger's encyclical letter, *Fides et Ratio*. The argument does not hold, and reveals its ideological scope because Ratzinger makes a categorial error. To demonstrate the a priori necessity of the return of the pluralism of rational and scientific investigation to the unity of the foundations of faith, he uses a stereotype, such as the one based on the not-historical category of the relationship between Faith and Reason. He tries then to justify it by anchoring himself to historical, religious and theological roots, in particular medieval Christian theology. Then, he concludes, the unitary rationality not only exists, but it is the one transported by the concrete historical dimensions that are the degraded traces of it.

However, not all beliefs are religious: as both Augustine and Ockham teach, we can believe in the existence of Rome, since we have never been there, if a faithful witness testifies it to me: an act of faith is the basis of many, if not all, cognitive experiences. Moreover, not every religious belief belongs to the line traced and presupposed by the Catholic faith. The encyclical, on the other hand, with the pretence of providing a True Exemplar for all men, presupposes an unshakeable confidence that the Christian faith is the only heir of Greek rationality.⁵ As if history were a hard fact that goes from Aristotle to 13th century commentators and there were no Arab-Islamic commentators – such as Avicenna or Averroès – who influenced Christian theologians themselves.

Let us add then that the founding value of this fact are the scriptural quotations and that the sources that comment on these foundations are those of medieval Catholic theology. And so, medieval thought and its (abused) theology – in a more devious way than was done by pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* with Thomas Aquinas and neotomism at the beginning of the 20th century – , become the vestige of the trunk to which contemporary man can cling, desperately (why then?) in search of a unitary sense of existence that reassures him against relativistic, sceptical and nominalistic way of thinking: *nomina nuda tenemus*... But the price we pay for this reassuring use of medieval thought is that history, the historical and theological discourses that speak of their regimes of historicity, are completely liquidated in the name of a shadow history build to justify the scenario of a contemporary thought – i. e. a theology imposed to the mankind by the pope...

By the way, to remain in the same field, it is also interesting observe how the dialectic between Orientalism and Occidentalism is used by a great philosopher,

⁴ Bianchi-Randi 1990: 96ff. On the contrast between the Monism of a single truth and the pluralism of the truths of others, see Giancarlo Bosetti's interpretation of Isaiah Berlin in Bosetti 2019: 22-35.

⁵ Parodi 1999: 320.

such as Hasan Hanafi, to justify a periodisation of the Islamic Middle Ages according to which the spans are divided in three, like the western ones, but inversely. In fact, only starting from the prejudice of a western medieval darkness, can a classicism of the same time be set against it as far as other cultures, such as Islam, are concerned.⁶

No Worries?

So, how is it that the medieval period responds so well to the demands of today's ideological fashions? Why is it, that the process of spatial dislocation finds such a suitable target in the Middle Ages? Firstly, we may say, because the centuries we define as «medieval» are essentially impossible to unify. It is a period whose contours – stretched for a thousand years – are so hazy, so blurred, that they can serve as a container for the most diverse ideological and narrative contexts. The Middle Ages is sufficiently far in time from the contemporary era, yet sufficiently close to it from an emotional point of view: an apparent chiasmus that makes it palatable to the media. Not least, the Middle Ages inhabit the cities we live in; and when this is not the case, we invent it, we rebuild it, we make it eternal, and, when a medieval cathedral actually rebuilt in the nineteenth century by Viollet le Duc goes on fire, we cry for its loss. And last, but not first, because even if it is better dreaming about national identities firmly rooted in the vagueness of an ideological past, and therefore easily usable as propaganda, emphasizing the post truth of these ideological reconstructions helps. For example, to remember that we really live in times when there are parliaments, such as the Polish Senate (law of 31 January 2018, passed with more than 57% of the voters) decreed prison—for the injured image of Poland—if anyone remembers that the Auschwitz-Birkenau camps were not lost in the medieval lands but were, in fact, in Poland.

We project outside the fears and worries of our times and exorcise them through heterotopias and dystopias that medieval people could not know. We stretch our experience into the vagueness of a past that is both gone and yet to come. Partly, it is a projection mechanism that is inherent in human psyche and in its tendency to reify fears by staging and narrating them. From other points of view, however, the first step towards the ideological demystification of this mechanism resides precisely in uncovering the different ways of heterotopically distorting the past, and thus revealing the bias they dissimulate.⁷ And

⁶ Campanini 2007b: 197.

⁷ For a useful survey and classification of the different «ways» we dream of the Middle Ages, see Carpegna Falconieri 2020a and 2020b: 70. On the conventionality and the categorization of the term in the history of historiography, see Fumagalli Beonio Brocchieri 2007: 11-12, with bibliography at p. 62; Fumagalli Beonio Brocchieri 2012: 8; Marenbon 2018 and Köning-Pralong 2019.

this is where we need to start a reflection on the distance that separates us from an objectification of memory, its historiographical reconstructions and their different targets. For grasping the nuances and unveiling the ideological mechanisms of a narrative reconstruction amounts to offering a critical reflection on the conditions that enable the narrative objectifications of the past that memory filters through.

Use and Interpretation

In this sense, it is useful to elaborate on two research tools that Umberto Eco has employed throughout his life and that permeated all of his work, both as a medievalist and as a massmediologist as well as a narrator (just think of *Foucault's Pendulum*): use and interpretation.⁸

Deploying a reflection through the lens of the Middle Ages is a necessary and sufficient condition to shed light on the behaviours induced by: 1) the fear of a historiographical object; 2) the relationships that historiographical and medievalist reconstructions entertain with one another through the respective «model readers», as semiologists would call them; 3) the crossing and the hybridisation that can derive from the interplay between «shadow history» and academic historiography; 4) the assumptions of interpretation and over-interpretation that move both kinds of inquiries; 5) the constant re-situating of the relationship between history and memory of the past.

This list of points is sufficiently broad and varied to discourage from falling into easy conclusions, simplifying analogies and unifying syntheses of such a complex thought—as if his philosophical and semiotic approach found its natural, ideal complement and completion in his narrative work.⁹ After all, I believe that

⁸ Eco, 1979; Eco 1990; Eco 1987; for a survey, Polidoro 2017: 194.

⁹ Cf. Eco 2007: 220-226; 281-317; and 520-523 (tr. by L.R. Schluderer): «[...] Since the idea of a sequence of interpretations holds and makes sense only if we admit that *there is something to be interpreted*, will it not make sense to investigate this *something* too? This is the problem I have definitively returned to in *Kant and the platypus*; but even before that, I could hardly be ascribed the idea that there are no facts, only interpretations, especially if one keeps in mind that I wrote a book entitled *The limits of interpretation* [...]. To the assertion “there are no facts, only interpretations”, I have always responded that, certainly every fact gives rise to different and conflicting interpretation; but also, a peculiarity of facts is precisely that they resist any interpretation they do not legitimate or support (as we now say also in Italian, with an annoying lexical borrowing from English: “non supportano”). In other words, while it is difficult to establish if an interpretation is better than another, untenable interpretations can always be recognised. That is, even though facts are always known and communicated through interpretations, yet facts somehow function as parameters of our interpretations. [...] Now, if I turn back and run through the whole development of my philosophical reflections, I realise I have placed them under the sign of limit—*limiting myself to represent the fascination of the unlimited in some of my narrative detours, with grotesque intentions* (my italics).

Eco himself, following Pareyson, has combated such tendencies to unification ever since his first studies on Aquinas' aesthetics; and that he was even ready to incur into charges of over-interpretation, all for the sake of maintaining this critical role.¹⁰

One may object that, although I did start my philosophical inquiries with studies on medieval aesthetics, I later focused on the endless interpretations an artwork can support, and that precisely for this reason one of my books written in 1962 bore the title *The Open Work* [...] So that, when nearly thirty years later I wrote *The Limits of Interpretations* (1990), some wondered whether I had recanted my praise to interpretive openness. But such an objection would not take into account that—as the title *The Open Work* made clear—what the interpretation was supposed to “open up” was still and always an artwork, and thus a form, something that pre-exists the interpretive act and somehow conditions it, even if it does not direct it towards a single, univocal end. As a matter of fact, I was then following, albeit in a secularised version, a line of thought inaugurated by Luigi Pareyson, who focused on the constant dialectic between form's legitimacy and interpretive initiative, between faithfulness and freedom. This, in truth, was the direction I had already undertaken in 1979 with the book *Lector in fabula* (*The role of the reader*). That title too had a double value, as it announced, on the one hand, the interpretive collaboration of the empirical reader, and supported, on the other, the rights of the *fabula* as something capable of designing its own Model Reader [...] I was then complying with a Popperian-style principle, according to which even though “good” interpretations cannot be recognised, “bad” ones can always be individuated. The text was therefore conceived as the parameter against which to judge its interpretations, even though only and precisely its interpretations can tell us what that text is.

And so it should be entirely clear that, from the point of view of the dialectical relationship between an object and its interpretations, any distinction between facts and texts ceases to exist. And not in the sense meant by some American analytical thinkers, that facts are also texts or can be analysed as texts – a view they ascribe to continental philosophers (and which is indeed shared by some strands of post-structuralism); but in the opposite sense, i.e., that texts are facts, something that pre-exists interpretations and whose priority cannot be questioned».

¹⁰ Since his first researches on Aquinas' aesthetics, Eco shared Étienne Gilson's criticism about the lack of a proper philosophy of art in Aquinas. Eco agreed with the great French historian that Aquinas did not have any awareness of artworks as they are conceived in modern artistic sensitivity – something that in turn would not be odd in the context of the Middle Ages and its specific kind of aesthetic sensitivity. Eco, who collaborated with *Rivista di Estetica* at the time, was also well aware that his research was animated by contemporary interests, for which the name “aesthetics” does not merely define the boundaries of fine arts but “opens up” the field to include any work of nature or of human activity as a quality of harmony proper to any form resulting from divine and/or human making. Eco braved the risk of being charged with overinterpretation for the sake of ferrying Italian aesthetics and culture beyond the provincialism of Croce and Gentile's idealism. This intellectual operation, carried out in the spirit of Italian Neo-enlightenment, had the features of a poetics of making as well as the concreteness of the artwork as a limit and a tangibly existing object of interpretation. This – and not an anachronistic historiographical reconstruction aimed at an ideological return of the Middle Ages – was the broader theoretical backdrop to Eco's researches towards the end of the 1950's. These very researches would find a fundamental theoretical continuity in his works on communication (as Umberto Eco made clear to me in a personal communication). Recently, John Marenbon (2017: 84-85) expressed some analogous criticisms, to which Eco replied with similar arguments as in the past (Eco 2017:

Eco had his own peculiar fashion of marking off the variable boundaries of the Middle Ages – understood as a historiographical rather than historical object, cut out on the basis of specific theoretical demands. A fashion that shows how Eco differently interpreted his sources through the conscious variation of uses and interpretations, depending on the varying readers and contexts. Indeed, it is the differences and analogies between these different narrative and research contexts, coupled with the underlying Aristotelian-Thomistic framework, that allow reading a common «theoretical area of convergence», so to speak, which turns medievalism into an interpretive tool that allows understanding the contemporary age and its hermeneutic and ideological distortions, its fears, its media representations.

Dreaming the Middle Ages

In 1983, Umberto Eco presented his list of *Ten ways of dreaming the Middle Ages* (*Dieci modi di sognare il Medioevo*), a «genre» that had great resonance in its days since, at that time, academic literature revolved around the issue of the historiographical partitions and the ideological projections through which we classify the past.¹¹ In the first few lines of the paper, Eco shows that the «ten ways» (from the dark ages to the misogynistic millennium, from Millenarianism to triumphant orthodoxy), directly touch the definition and categorization of the Middle Ages, as well as the meaning of this «typically medieval» millennium both in the eyes of scholars and in collective imagination.¹²

In his typically jesting manner, Eco reveals that these ten ways of dreaming the medieval period hide the distinction between use and interpretation. In doing so, Eco seems to push these two hermeneutical tools beyond their boundaries to explore the ways of living our relationship with the present and with the past, of recording it, of reconstructing it through the settling of uses, the stratification

100-101): this suggests a certain continuity, at least for what concerns some core issues, in Eco's philosophical development.

¹¹ *Ten ways of dreaming the Middle Ages* was first presented as a closing speech at the conference *Il sogno nel medioevo*, held in San Gimignano, Italy, on 12th November 1983. Speakers included Sergio Gensini, Giosuè Musca, Franco Cardini, Giorgio Galli, Maria Teresa Fumagalli Beonio-Brocchieri, Carlo Pagetti, Oriana Palusci, Gianfranco De Turre, Pasquale Corsi, Raffaele Iorio, Sergio Valzania, Sergio Micheli, Vito Attolini, Paolo Beonio-Brocchieri, Maria Luisa Masetti. The contribution was later rewritten and published for the first time in *Sugli specchi* (1985), immediately becoming a reference work on Medievalism. Multiple editions in foreign languages followed, with the latest publication by Bompiani in 2012. Here I refer to the 1995 edition. The text that was presented at the 1983 conference, which focused on the Middle Ages in contemporary times, and which reprised the essay *L'altro medioevo*, in "Quaderni Medievali", edited by Giosuè Musca in 1976, was published in 1986.

¹² De Rijk 1985: 37.

of interpretations and the critical resituating of their limits. Supposing that a boundary can be drawn between interpretations, over-interpretations and uses of the past, what interpretation and what use do we make of a millennium of history?

The medieval period is an age conventionally constructed by an equally conventional modernity to contain, conceal or glorify – depending on the dominant ideology – a thousand years in the life of humankind.¹³

The apparently unsolved dichotomy between use and interpretation is the key to tell us that we live in an uncertain world, made of differences and hybrids more than stable and reassuring identities. A world with indistinct boundaries that we try to fix by dreaming a thousand classifications, which, as reassuring drawers, can contain and label each thing as real, credible and true for the mere fact of existing—as it happened in the Middle Ages, when the tendency to encyclopedic categorization was rampant.

Dreaming of the Middle Ages, living it as a nightmare, a utopia or an epiphany, projected either backward or forward in time, reveals the ideology of our being rational, as it exploits the ways in which we represent a period like the Middle Ages to show that we are rational because we are ideological.¹⁴

To uncover its ideological implication, Eco suggests, we must unveil how the category «Middle Ages» works in classifications and in contexts of interpretation and of use.

Reconstructing and Patching Together

In particular, Eco employs two terms: «reconstructing» and «patching together».¹⁵ These two seem to be to opposed to one another almost as rival armies. It might even seem that the former has all the rights to look down on the latter. And the reader's temptation is to draw some distinction in value between reconstructing and patching together, such that the first constitutes a good way of engaging with the medieval period while the second is a bad way: the latter appropriates and uses, the former observes and interprets.

Such a device would be very useful in delimiting and defending «professional» medievalist studies, nowadays inaccessible – perhaps unfortunately – to any non-

¹³ Eco 1997: 261-77.

¹⁴ Grafton: 1997. For a difference between Model Redaers in Medieval History of Philosophy and in Medievalist Fiction, see Marmo: 2019.

¹⁵ Eco 1995 (1985): 83. Maria Teresa Fumagalli Beonio Brocchieri and Jacques Le Goff similarly criticise this historiographical approach. In particular, Jacques Le Goff, in his last book, emphasises the absurdity of the idea of an intrinsically objective partition of historiographical objects and the fact that they are instead essentially social objects. Cf. Fumagalli Beonio Brocchieri 2007: 13; Le Goff 2014.

academic reader, against the many ways in which the Middle Ages have been constructed and imagined. This may work also in relation to the several roles the term «Middle Ages» has been assigned, which might explain or criticise, challenge or evoke the phantoms that our times imagine about an «elsewhere» lost in a hazy and blurred past. This mishmash may not appear homogeneous, but it is: it is called medievalism and corresponds to the «patching together» model.

Many scholars adopt this framework and insist on the incommensurability of (i) any «imaginary Middle Ages» (that would result from the use) with (ii) the «Middle Ages for the specialists» (that would result from interpretation) allegedly reconstructed in an impartial and uninterested manner because in line with the original and foundational spirit of philology. Perhaps professional historians (with some exception) should stop connoting the Middle Ages and its philosophical, theological, scientific etc. thought only on the basis of their own mythical projection of an objective, supposedly factual reconstruction, and go back to employing their authoritativeness to establish the limitations of past events' factuality and of the uses that have been made (or could be made) of the term «medieval» and why.¹⁶ This would be especially necessary today, when there is a proliferation of unhappy mythologies, fuelled by a memory that selects historical paths on the basis of post-truths, founded on sources whose credibility is merely reputational.¹⁷

Be that as it may, «medievalism» would come to mean a sort of historiographical-scientific misconduct that characterizes common sense and results from the attempt to fill up the gaps left by specialized studies. Here, Eco's lesson is more relevant than ever, especially when he stresses that the two models are not to be contrasted as right and wrong. Instead, specialism and its patching together shadow offer two paradigms, whose distinction is not to be understood as that between two different research approaches – as if they were two equivalent and alternative ways of construing textual interpretations, two equally valid ways of looking at the same object. If that were so, one would philologically reconstruct antiquity, but patch together the Middle Ages, because this is what the nature of the two periods themselves, by virtue of their «typicality», requires: in this perspective, antiquity would have all the rights to be philologically and objectively reconstructed, while the unfortunate Middle Ages could only be used by «consumers», who are tied to a past still perceived as a living testimony to the traditions that, until not that long ago, were still alive and well in our countryside – as Ermanno Olmi's movie *L'Albero degli Zoccoli* (1978, *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*) emblematically represents. Such an approach to the historiographical object “Middle Ages” is misguided.

¹⁶ This approach has seeped through the gaps left by historiographical segmentation and replaced a healthier form of divulgation, which, through essays and encyclopedia entries, could work as a corrective antidote to the pervasive availability of unscientific sources. On the notion of justification applied to historiographical theories, see Fedriga 2012, and, more extensively, Fedriga, Limonta 2016. See also Limonta 2019: 106.

¹⁷ Cf. Ferraris 2017: 48-55.

What we need is a «revenge of intelligence over mere factual data», as Marc Bloch would put it: an interpretive intelligence that settles recollections, stratifies them, filters memory through and entrusts it to oblivion; in other words, a sort of practical intelligence that vanishes whenever philological traces and data are equated to one another.¹⁸ In relation to this, Eco draws a parallel that is intentionally characterized as a simplifying mishmash and that, for this very reason, is extremely relevant: we look at antiquity with philological eyes, but we consider the Middle Ages also from a utilitarian perspective. We employ medieval buildings like town houses, churches etc., in a way that cannot be judged tout court illegitimate; thus, the post-medieval use of the Middle Ages cannot be denied its *raison d'être*. The study of these re-inventions, of these «dreams», paves the way for a critical medievalism, aware of its own intentions and limits, of what it wants to do and of what can no longer be modified, and rightly so.

Forty years on after Eco's essay, we can say that today's historiographical reconstructions feed more and more on the myth of a historical truth that is factual because philological, and which constitute a common ground for all the analyses that tend to parcel out medieval thought, while at the same time forms of medievalism continue to thrive, now even accompanied by historiography on medievalism.¹⁹ We may perhaps say, then, that the study of medievalism is not useless, but contributes to the understanding of what is *not* medieval but is related to the social passions, beliefs, bias and spontaneous ideologies that connect us to today's use of its reception.²⁰ Criticising the unreasoned equivalence between philological textuality and truth does not mean reducing historical truth on the same level as fictional truth (in our case that of medievalism). What we want to establish is *in what* sense a fictional truth can have an alethic status similar to that of historical truths.²¹ Otherwise, it would be enough to statements on fictitious events are *de dicto* just as *de dicto* are statements on historical events and historical characters. What we mean by this is that statements about fictitious events can reveal something true about this world without being trivially *ersatz*: rather, in this context, medievalist genres like dystopias, heterotopias, and retrotopias are subject of reflection in relation to both individual prohibition and collective fears.²²

¹⁸ Bloch 1949 (1969): 69.

¹⁹ For a survey, see Carpegna Falconieri, Facchini 2018 and Carpegna Falconieri 2020a and 2020b; Fedriga 2009: 483-504; Sergi 2005 and 2010; Imbach, Maierù 1991.

²⁰ Jauss 1989.

²¹ Marmo 2019.

²² Ciraci 2018: 35-37.

Suspended between the extraneousness of fragmented historiographical reconstructions in which time has such an ordinary dimension that it is taken as an unthought of, and the inability to provide answers to the uncertainty of the present and the cancellation of the past, we try to exorcise these social fears. Such fears have the characteristic of being part of a determinism with which we feel a family resemblance out of which no longer master the boundaries. Thus, we objectify this feeling through medievalist genres. These cultural habits are individually belief-dependent, intentional social objects, characterized by the ways in which we identify them more than by the fact that they are somewhere.²³ Such genres seem to pervade many aspects of social life, which erratically and bulimically moves through the media, bouncing from the technological seriality of digital platforms to the collective passions that wish for a return of nationalisms, neo-millenarianisms, resentments, racist stereotypes, negationisms passed off as a past reconstructions. Analysing, as Eco did, the functioning of these objectifications, that is, exposing the mechanisms and biases that fuel them, is not only useful as an academic and philosophical exercise. Indeed, the moment political propaganda appropriates these spontaneous ideologies, turning them into real beliefs and social passions that affect our lives, revealing their functioning becomes an intellectual duty.²⁴

And even if we were to admit, as Borges seems to suggest,²⁵ that medieval studies can be a narrative engine and a subgenres of medievalism, it would still be our duty to engage with these categories in order to understand the origin of many labels and prejudices that are given for granted (and as such disseminated by the media), and in order to critically re-read, and take distance from, any utilitarian patching together.

So here is how the ideological charge of medievalism, can be usefully employed, if interpreted in the opposite direction: it does not so much help us replace a bad patching together with a better interpretation, or erase prejudices; rather, it can unburden and enlighten those who are curious about history, making them less inclined to fall into propagandistic traps and more conscious of their inherent biases, while also aware of the fact that such biases are unavoidable as well as revealing of the social and ideological nature of our intellectual constructs.²⁶

²³ Eco 2000: 144-145; Bonomi 1994: 90-91.

²⁴ Ferraris 2017: 131; Pisanty 2019: 52-53 and 200-203.

²⁵ Borges 1984.

²⁶ Eco 1985: 87.

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