

III. Film

Films based on the holy grail motif have been produced since the earliest days of cinema. Major differences occur as the result of differing degrees of fidelity between the filmic adaptation and its literary source, varying decisions as to how the sacred object of the holy grail should be represented and interpreted in the film, and the choice of genre, which impacts the aesthetic level of the film. In most of the filmic adaptations the grail is identified with the chalice used at the Last Supper, which offers redemption and illumination to its potential finder. Accordingly, the grail is depicted both as the object of a physical quest in space and time, as well as metaphorically representing an interior search for cognition and personal experience.

An early American version of the legend, *Parsifal* (1904) was directed by Edwin S. Porter, produced by Thomas Edison, and based on Richard Wagner's opera *Parsifal* (1882). William Worthington directed another early American silent film adaptation, *The Grail*, in 1915 as a modern interpretation set in the contemporary U.S. The film suggests that by fol-

lowing traditional "American" virtues such as honesty and hard work anyone can find the grail (Aronstein). The first sound recorded film depicting the grail motif was *The Knights of the Round Table* (dir. Richard Thorpe, 1953, US/UK) produced in the tradition of the schmaltzy knight movies of the 1950s.

More artistically self-contained adaptations followed in the 1970s with two French films *Lancelot du Lac* (dir. Robert Bresson, 1974, Lancelot of the Lake) and *Perceval le Gallois* (dir. Eric Rohmer, 1978, Perceval the Gaul). Both versions adapt the grail motif in the tradition of the *cinema d'auteur* interested in an independent, artistic interpretation not focused on box office success. Bresson and Rohmer, each of whom also wrote the screenplay for their respective films, drew from medieval French literature, aiming to responsibly represent and hand down French cultural heritage.

The British comedy troupe Monty Python's Flying Circus dealt with the grail topic in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (dir. Terry Gilliam/Terry Jones, 1975, UK, see fig. 4). The result was a new satirical interpretation based on a profound knowledge of the medieval, literary model. In 1981 a prototype of the commercial Arthur-and-grail fantasy films (Graf) *Excalibur* (dir. John Boormann, 1981, US/UK) was shown in the cinema with remarkable success. The adaptation is set in the mythical medieval era of the grail whilst being influenced by Jungian psychology focused on archetypes that depicts a battle "between true kingship and poisoned patriarchy" (Aronstein). The absence of any reference to the Christian history of salvation, aside from the object of the chalice itself, underlines the importance of King Arthur as savior of the Empire replacing Jesus Christ (Lacy: 38).

Steven Spielberg directed and produced (written by George Lucas) *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989, US), another modern grail adaptation as the third part of the Indiana Jones adventure series. It was a box office success and was awarded an Oscar in the category of best sound editing. The film represents the grail in a broadly traditional manner as a chalice, a mystical object that the hero has to find, and by which he is able to save the world from evil.

The Fisher King (1991, US), directed by Terry Gilliam, has some similar characteristics to *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* despite its more formal staging. Set in present day New York, the grail is a cheap sports cup symbolizing the protagonist's hope for redemption. Both films can be seen as a part of the grail tradition that transforms the legend by retelling it. *The Da Vinci Code* (dir. Ron Howard, 2006, US) follows this tradition but enhances it by reversing the grail motif completely. Based on Dan Brown's 2003 novel it is the only adaptation based on contemporary literature. The grail is not an object in this controversial film but rather what is depicted as the historical truth about Jesus, his



Fig. 4 *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975)

physical relation with Mary Magdalene and their descendants. Unsurprisingly, *The Da Vinci Code* was heavily criticized by the Roman Catholic Church and other traditional denominations.

A common thread connects most of the filmic adaptations of the holy grail from a functional perspective: they represent a contemporary filmic transformation of the philosophical topic of the “proofs” for the existence of God.

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See also → Chrétien de Troyes; → Joseph of Arimathea; → Robert de Boron; → Wolfram von Eschenbach