Past, Present, and Neo

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The past is never dead. It's not even past.  
William Faulkner

Cypher: What happened?  
Neo: A black cat went past us, and then another that looked just like it.  
Cypher: How much like it? Was it the same cat?  
Neo: It might have been. I'm not sure.  

The Matrix (1999)

At first sight, few cities could have less of a link with the Middle Ages than Atlanta. Founded in 1837 to provide a train terminus to connect the port of Savannah with the Midwest, and about 3,500 miles and 400 years removed from Old Europe, Georgia's capital seems to be quintessentially modern. Nevertheless, an alert first time visitor might notice a whole host of medieval signposts:

At the airport's baggage claim, a colorful screen display invites her to be "swept away to an age of bravery and honor" and partake in "a feast of the eyes and appetite with all the splendor and romance" of medieval Spain at the Atlanta Castle of Medieval Times, a dinner theater chain. A courtesy van, which treats her as if she were a noble lady at a medieval court, takes her to her downtown hotel, the Knights Inn. After a change of clothes, she takes a taxi to the Catholic Cathedral of Christ the King, where she attends her college roommate's wedding, which includes the celebration of the Eucharist, a sacramental ritual originating in the Fourth Lateran Church Council's decision on transubstantiation in 1215. She is especially impressed by the performance of members of the Atlanta Early Music Alliance, who perform wedding songs from before 1800, accompanied by instruments made according to medieval and early modern building instructions. On her way out of the Cathedral, a Knights of Columbus honor guard greets the guests who are then bused to the wedding reception at Rhodes Hall on Peachtree Street. There, our visitor admires the Victorian Romanesque revival architecture and watches as the photographer takes pictures of the newlyweds before a backdrop of stained-glass windows depicting the rise and fall of the Confederacy and a gallery of saintly-looking generals. Her day continues with a guided afternoon visit to the Margaret Mitchell House arranged for some of the non-Atlantan guests by the wedding planner. The guide ends his narrative of Mitchell's biography with informing his audience how she was killed by a speeding car on Peachtree Street in 1949. She was on her way to the cinema to watch A Canterbury Tale, a British wartime movie loosely linked with Geoffrey Chaucer's late fourteenth-century Canterbury Tales. Inspired by the story of Mitchell's life, our visitor ends...
her day by renting David O. Selznick's film version of Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* in her hotel room. She drifts off to sleep shortly after taking in the famous introductory foreword: “There was a land of Cavaliers and Cotton Fields called the Old South. Here in this pretty world, Gallantry took its last bow. Here was the last ever to be seen of Knights and their Ladies Fair, of Master and of Slave. Look for it only in books, for it is no more than a dream remembered, a Civilization gone with the wind....”

When I share this obviously fictional narrative with my students, they quickly catch on and research and identify dozens of other examples of how individuals, groups, corporations, and nations have recreated, reenacted, and reinvented the medieval past to make statements in their own postmedieval art, architecture, entertainment, literature, politics, race, religion, and sports. They soon notice that, while practically all these older forms of “medievalism” employ some kind of technology and scientific practice to represent what we know about the “real” Middle Ages, there now also seems to exist a new and different kind of connecting with medieval culture, one related to the ways in which various new media allow for heretofore unknown representations of space, story, and time.

More often than not, such recent narratives, with which my students tend to be more familiar than I, no longer make any serious attempt at heeding what scholars have established about the “real” Middle Ages. In fact, neomedievalist stories (*A Knight's Tale; Arcanum; Guild; Skyrim; Medieval; Total War; World of Warcraft*) are content with creating pseudo-medieval worlds that playfully obliterate history, authenticity, and historical accuracy and replace history-based narratives with “simulacra” of the medieval, employing images and narrating stories that are neither an original nor the faithful copy of an original, but entirely “Neo.” Does this mean that these new simulational media will fundamentally change how we speak about and relate to the past, without a clear sense of origins and originality, “likeness” and verisimilitude? Will we no longer, as first Renaissance humanists and later Enlightenment thinkers have admonished us, try to become ever more perfect as human beings by studying the original stories, language, and motivations of our predecessors? And will this shift in our relationship to humanity's past contribute to the “posthuman” or “transhuman” kind of world science fiction writers and futurologists have been contemplating?

I am convinced that our students, with their strongly interdisciplinary curricular focus, are particularly well prepared to investigate “medievalist” as well as “neomedievalist” narratives, and Atlanta, Georgia Tech, and particularly LMC provide the perfect intellectual lab spaces to do that. As “critical makers” who write and interpret, build and critique, play and create, they are able to shape the future developments at the intersection of ever so many humanistic, sociological, and technological practices. In their multimodal lives and careers, past, present, and “Neo” will be of equal importance.
Humanistic Perspectives in a Technological World