

## Transmutation in John Boorman's *Excalibur*: accuracy and intersemiotic translation in the movie adaptation of *Le Morte d'Arthur*

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## Abstract

In 1981, the British movie director, producer and scriptwriter John Boorman decided to release his film *Excalibur*, a cinematographic adaptation from the medieval masterpiece *Le Morte d'Arthur* by sir Thomas Malory. Critics and audience agree with the fact that Boorman's work is the most accurate movie adaptation of the Arthurian cycle so far.

The current article aims at analyzing the relationship among *Le Morte d'Arthur* and *Excalibur*, which, based on the aforementioned book, has tried to make an updated translation for the contemporary audience. This research studies the effects of the application of different theories—intersemiotics, multimodality and movie adaptation—in order to find out how they reflect characteristics and closely subjective traits of the movie director who decided to take over sir Thomas Malory and how these traits have influenced his task of translation and adaptation.

I have analyzed in a contrastive way a lecture between the convergences and divergences in Malory's and Boorman's works with the aim of highlighting all those elements of the intersemiotic translation or transmutation, cinematographic adaptation and resemiotization which show the British author's incomparable unequivocal style. I have used Iedema's *Multimodality, resemiotization: extending the analysis of discourse as multi-semiotic practice* as well as Sánchez Noriega's *De la literatura al cine: teoría y análisis de la adaptación* to guide my research.

**Keywords:** English literature; comparative literature; cinema; Arthurian cycle.

## 1. Introduction

During the late 70s and early 80s, the world of the cinema experienced a golden era which witnessed the birth of numerous films considered as cult films nowadays. *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones and the Riders of the Lost Ark* or *Clash of the Titans* triumphed in the billboards all around the world, sharing a simple formula. An inexperienced young protagonist is ordered with the epic quest of stopping an evil which threatens to destroy the civilization as it is known. In response to this theme extended in the world of the cinema, in 1981, the movie director, producer and scriptwriter John Boorman decided to release his film *Excalibur*, a cinematographic adaptation from the medieval masterpiece *Le Morte d'Arthur* by sir Thomas Malory. A young Arthur has the epic duty of being king and unifying the kingdom in the middle of the chaos of war and evil of the sorceress Morgan. In spite of the fact that the production of the movie may seem opportunistic because of the repetition of the popular formula, the truth is that its release is the result of years of work of Boorman's ever-wanted project.

This article is devoted to the analysis of the process of movie adaptation as a result of an intersemiotic translation and aims at demonstrating how a process which, a priori, should be pure and aseptic, suffers from artistic alterations since it is intimately linked to the personal conception of the one who carries it out. *Excalibur* has been chosen as the object of this analysis due to the fact that Boorman's work is said to be the most accurate movie version of *Le Morte d'Arthur* so far. Hence, in my view, it is interesting to develop an analysis about the factors which lead Boorman's film to that level of accuracy and how the movie director's traits of personality and style are inevitably reflected along the process of intersemiotic translation which the film adaptation requires.

In order to fulfil these set objectives, I will start with a brief analysis of the elements which compose *Excalibur*. Once the framework is established, I will contrastively analyze a lecture of the convergences and divergences between the works by sir Thomas Malory and John Boorman, with the aim of highlighting every single element of intersemiotic translation or transmutation and movie adaptation which explains the method that the British movie director has followed to achieve the acceptance of *Excalibur* as the most accurate version of the story of king Arthur in the world of cinema.

## 2. Work presentation: *Excalibur*

The following section suggests a structured analysis of the work *Excalibur*, gathering the essential aspects which characterize the main axis on which John Boorman's movie production is based. With the purpose of achieving the optimal development of this section, I will set a work scheme which gathers the following points: analysis of the title and genre and a discourse analysis which will study the figure of the narrator and the narratee.

## 2.1. Title and genre analysis

Boorman's original intention was to produce a movie focused on the character of Merlin, who would give name to the film. Nonetheless, in 1981 the TV channel Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) had the usage rights of Merlin as a name because of the emission of the series *Mr. Merlin*, which was a modern version of the adventures of the famous sorcerer and his apprentice in the city of San Francisco. As Boorman could not entitle his film as he wished, he provisionally gave it the name of *Knights* in the early moments of the filming. However, the famous British movie director Ridley Scott signed the name *Knight* in the light of the possibility of a movie shoot of medieval setting after finishing with the shooting of *Alien*. Consequently, in the middle of the movie shoot, Boorman had to change the name to *Excalibur* definitely. Nevertheless, the election of the name reflects the fundamental pillar which supports the film. The mythical sword Excalibur appears configured as the only immovable element throughout the film. The king of the land, either Uther or Arthur, needs a sword to be king. And the secret of the Grail is that the king and the land are one. This is the reason why Excalibur is the one which chooses the king and, by extension, brings the peace to the land.

As far as the genre is concerned, Boorman's production is catalogued as a medieval epic fantasy movie with components of adventure and drama. Due to the fact that a great part of the plot shows king Uther's and king Arthur's efforts to unify the land under a sole banner, there are frequent scenes of medieval battles represented by means of sieges, trials by combat or jousts. The epic part comes from the eternal confrontation between good and evil, the eternal cycle of life and the death represented through legendary battles accompanied by an unparalleled soundtrack which comprises Carl Orff's *O Fortuna*, or Richard Wagner's *Siegfried's Funeral March*, which rises the epic to its greatest exponent. The path to unify the land and save it from the decadence and downfall is an adventure riddled with innumerable dangers in itself. Nevertheless, the search of the Grail is considered as one of the greatest adventures—or the adventure par excellence—described in the history of literature. Eventually, the dramatic component of the film appears in the tragic death of many knights in the search of the Grail, as well as the fatal end which culminates in Mordred's murder by his father and the mortally wounded Arthur going to the island of Avalon by boat.

## 2.2. Discourse analysis

Most of the movie is narrated by the so-called invisible narrator, that is, the one who appears in most movies. The story is screened in an audiovisual way for the audience, but it lacks any kind of voice-over or an identifiable narrator. Despite the fact that the presence of this kind of narrator should not be perceived, in a theoretical level, the so-characteristic literary style of the dialogues and shots of Boorman, as well as the appearance of the survivor as the archetypal character recurrent in his movie collection, enable the intuition

of the presence of the British movie director as mega-narrator or implicit author<sup>1</sup>, as being the movie director and scriptwriter.

Conversely, the character of Merlin can be found as a narrator himself. When Arthur pulls Excalibur from the rock, Merlin appears to confess Arthur his true lineage and the sorcerer explains to him how he had trusted sir Ector with his custody. In this way, Arthur discovers a past at a time he is already known by the audience. Thus, Merlin is configured as a dramatized narrator, autodiegetic and homodiegetic in first degree. In other words, he offers an inner perspective as it is the same as the character who narrates his experiences.

The type of discourse used in the film completely varies throughout it. Although it can be generally summarized as a literary discourse because it is a novel adaptation, the mega-narrator's or implicit narrator's function is clearly referential, as its aim is to invisibly and objectively narrate the events of the plot, using the scenes as a means. Nonetheless, an evaluating discourse is easily recognizable when the difference between good and evil is boosted and which falls on to those characters who serve the path of good, such as Arthur or sir Perceval, in opposition to those of evil nature, such as Morgan and her offspring Mordred. Finally, a direct or dramatic discourse can be noticed through the characters' literary dialogues.

Two different narratees can be found because of the two narrators of the film. The first and main narratee is the one addressed by the mega-narrator or implicit author. In his adaptation of *Le Morte d'Arthur*, John Boorman recreates a version for any kind of audience (over 13) without needing a previous knowledge of the setting or the characters. The director involves the audience in Arthur's complete vital cycle as the protagonist. The other type of narratee is defined in Arthur himself, who, after hearing Merlin's revelation of his past, knows the truth of his own lineage.

### 3. Convergences with sir Thomas Malory's work: *Le Morte d'Arthur*

A comparative analysis between the works *Le Morte d'Arthur* and *Excalibur* will be carried out in the following lines, with the purpose of showing the similarities between both works and those original elements of Malory's work which appear unaltered in John Boorman's movie adaptation. To conduct this task, I will use a contrastive methodology through the analysis of the intersemiotic translation or transmutation, paying special attention to the

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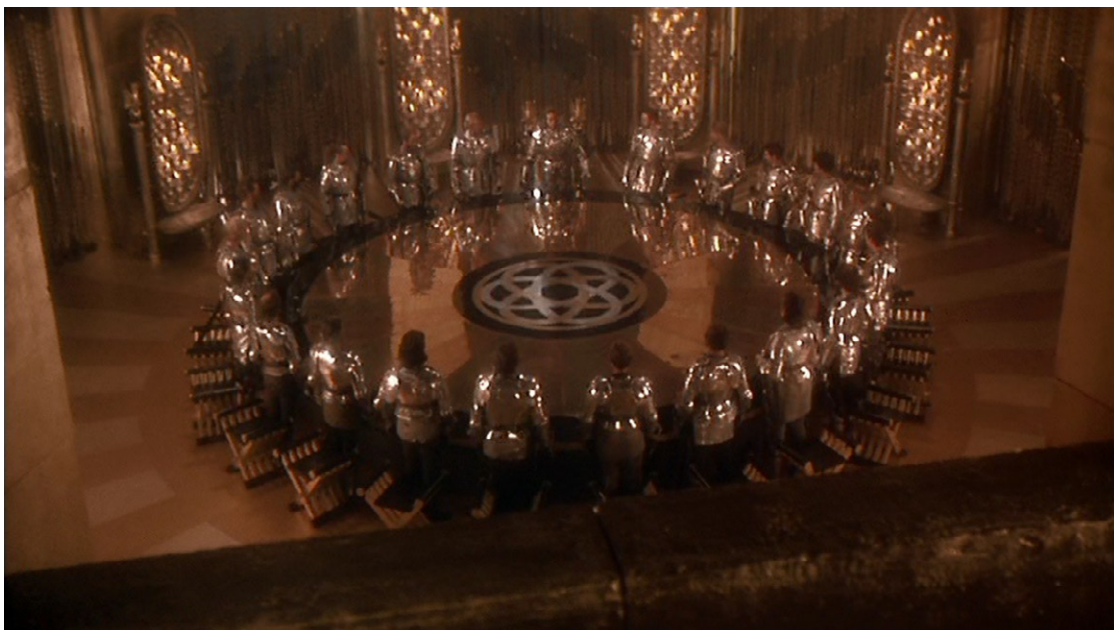
1 [Translated by myself] The marks of enunciation, the mega-narrator's or implicit narrator's marks, which are an essential part of the discursive mechanism, are placed in the formal level perceptible in the first level (camera movements, angles) and, mostly, in the relationships between image-sound, know-vision, presence-absence (Gómez Tarín, 2009: 3493).

historical and cultural contexts which affected both the writer and the reader, as well as the director and the audience of the 15th and 20th centuries, respectively.

The first convergence found in both works deals with the characters. When Boorman considered the cast of characters who would participate in *Excalibur*, he confronted the difficulty of including in the movie the great number of characters named in Malory's work. For this reason, the director made the decision of putting a particular emphasis on the leading characters of the main plot, giving them voice, whereas he includes a great number of characters into the background. Numerous examples evidence this method throughout the movie: the audience completely ignores the names of the knights who appear in the scene where Arthur pulls *Excalibur* from the stone, with the exception of those who actively participate in the conversation which originates the conflict because of Arthur's recognition as king. Nevertheless, the greatest example which shows Boorman's technique is placed in the scenes where the knights gather around the Round Table. In spite of the fact that twenty-four knights with their respective ladies are sitting together with Arthur and Guenevere around the table, only the identity of ten of them is known as it can be shown in the picture 1. In different moments of the film, the following knights are mentioned: sir Lancelot of the Lake, sir Perceval, sir Bors, sir Uryens, sir Gawain, sir Ector, sir Kay, sir Leondegrance and sir Meliot. Each of them happens to meet when they are sitting around the Round Table in *Le Morte d'Arthur* in different parts of Malory's work. Therefore, Boorman leaves to the audience's imagination the fact of giving identity to the other fourteen knights, as well as to the ladies who accompany them.

### PICTURE 1

The Round Table depicted in John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981)



The next convergence precisely lies in the approach of the Round Table as the central axis of Camelot. The Round Table fulfils a determining function, as it gives name to the order of knights founded by Arthur, it is around it where the knights meet and it is the point of departure of the adventures. In both works, the Round Table originates in the same point of the story, after the unification of the land, when Arthur is proclaimed king. The appearance of the mythical table in *Le Morte d'Arthur* is described along the two first chapters of the third book. The first chapter of the third book is entitled "How King Arthur took a wife, and wedded Guenever, daughter to Leodegrance, King of the Land of Cameliard, with whom he had the Round Table". In *Excalibur*, the majestic table can be contemplated for the first time in the minute 65 of the movie, after the same events described in the title of the chapter of Malory's work. The round shape of the table entails a powerful metaphor itself. According to the honorary president of the Hispanic Branch of the International Arthurian Society, Carlos Alvar (1997), the Round Table is the most representative image of the court of King Arthur, and his knights, the best in the world. It is built, in order not to privilege any of its knights. The round shape placed king Arthur in an equidistant way to the rest of his knights as a symbol of brotherhood and equality. By this means, every single member of the order, no matter if king or knight, obtained the same vision and the same place as his partners when they spoke.

Merlin's warning to Arthur about Guenevere's future betrayal is constituted as a new convergent element between Malory's work and Boorman's movie. In the beginning of the third book of Malory's work, after the battles which led Arthur to the unification of England, the young king asks Merlin for a piece of advice about who should be his wife:

In the beginning of Arthur, after he was chosen king by adventure and by grace; for the most part of the barons knew not that he was Uther Pendragon's son, but as Merlin made it openly known. But yet many kings and lords held great war against him for that cause, but well Arthur overcame them all, for the most part the days of his life he was ruled much by the counsel of Merlin. So it fell on a time King Arthur said unto Merlin, My barons will let me have no rest, but needs I must take a wife, and I will none take but by thy counsel and by thine advice. It is well done, said Merlin, that ye take a wife, for a man of your bounty and noblesse should not be without a wife. Now is there any that ye love more than another? Yea, said King Arthur, I love Guenever the king's daughter, Leodegrance of the land of Cameliard [...]. And this damosel is the most valiant and fairest lady that I know living, or yet that ever I could find. Sir, said Merlin, as of her beauty and fairness she is one of the fairest alive, but, an ye loved her not so well as ye do, I should find you a damosel of beauty and of goodness that should like you and please you, and your heart were not set; but there as a man's heart is set, he will be loath to return. That is truth, said King Arthur. But Merlin warned the king covertly that Guenever was not wholesome for him to take to wife, for he warned him that Launcelot should love her, and she him again (Malory, 1994 [1485]: 50).

The king's youth, his pride, his love or a mix of the three cause that, even warned by Merlin, Arthur disregards his friend's advice and decides to take Guenevere as his wife and queen.



In *Excalibur*, in the scene of the celebration of Arthur's and his knights' victory in the process of the unification of the kingdom, Arthur tells Merlin that he wants Guenevere to be his queen and the sorcerer warns him of what he had seen in his visions. "Guenevere and a beloved friend who will betray you. You're not listening. Your heart is not. Love is deaf as well as blind" (Boorman, 1981). In the choice of Merlin's words in the film, Boorman's clear intention to allude to the reference to the heart in Malory's text can be surmised. Merlin does not belong to the world of men and, for this reason, in that same scene the sorcerer maintains that "this lunacy called love, this mad distemper, that strikes down both beggar and kings" (Boorman, 1981). Merlin has a negative concept of love based on the consequences it causes on those who are seized by their passions. In fact, he suffers from its consequences later by the hand of Morgan. Merlin warns Arthur and the sorcerer is bothered by the young man's impetuosity and foolishness when Arthur is seized by his passions, even though he knows the predicted betrayal. At that point of the story of both works, Arthur has just defeated his rivals and been crowned as king. Arthur is a young man who, in spite of lacking experience as a monarch, is filled with the certainty of obtaining everything he desires. For this reason, although Merlin's warning is stated, Arthur is determined to alter the sorcerer's predicted destiny for a less fateful one.

The movie plot is the most characteristic convergence with regard to the book. As it has been mentioned before, *Excalibur* is considered as the most accurate adaptation of *Le Morte d'Arthur* so far. The different directors' free interpretations who have brought the story of Arthur and his knights to the big screen have ended up creating changes in the story or in the setting where the legend is located, totally subjected to the movie director's perspective and style. Consequently, most movies and series about king Arthur are versions based on the legend and not movie adaptations nor an intersemiotic translation of Malory's work. The script written by John Boorman and Rospo Pallenberg is created from the perspective of the transmutation and it is configured as the intersemiotic translations of the chapters I, III, from XIII to XVIII, XX and XXI of *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Boorman himself talked about the creative process of the script of his film in the interview given to Harlan Kennedy:

"I wrote the original script myself," says Boorman, "but at some point I got stuck on it. It was a bit too long and convoluted. So I got Rospo in. In the past we'd always worked together sitting in a room talking out scenes, thrashing them out, writing them down, and then revising them. But in this case I asked him to go away and think about the script and try to see if he could come up with any ideas about the structure." "You see, I was determined," he adds, "to tell the whole story of the *Morte d'Arthur*, and that restricted the amount of time I had to develop the characters, the themes, and to make everything work" (Kennedy, 1981: 3).

The accuracy towards Malory's work with which Boorman directed his movie causes that the antagonists of the story turn into another convergence which other movies do not share. In *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Morgan appears depicted as a treacherous enemy of Arthur and his knights from the fourth book of the work. Morgan secretly conspires with her lover, the



knight sir Accolon of Gaul, to end with the king's life. Morgan gets to capture Arthur by means of a trickery during a hunt and she incarcerates him. She takes Excalibur from the king and gives it to her lover so that he ends up with Arthur. Arthur's expertise with the sword and the Lady of the Lake's intervention enables the king being victorious getting his legitimate sword back. Before dying because of the injuries suffered in the fight, sir Accolon confesses Arthur his half-sister's betrayal. In a last act of revenge because of her lover's death, Morgan throws Arthur's fabulous and enchanted scabbard into the depths of a lake, losing it forever. From that moment on, Morgan endeavors the fall of Arthur and his knights by means of conspiracies, manipulations and trickeries. Likewise, sir Mordred, the son who was born from the sin of the incestuous relationship between Arthur and Morgan, appears as enemy of his father's cause throughout the books XX and XXI. Their confrontation is especially intense when sir Mordred usurps the throne of England and even aspires to marry Guenevere while Arthur is in the middle of a war against sir Lancelot. Such a serious betrayal would require a punishment, since king Arthur had to go to war against sir Mordred, who would end up murdered by his father. In *Excalibur*, the sorceress Morgan holds grudge towards Arthur and his father Uther Pendragon because they had destroyed and usurped her family. As a consequence of the relentless hate professed along the years, Morgan conspires the king's downfall through manipulation. She uttered words of hate in sir Gawain's ears and this fact drives the knight to accuse the queen of being disloyal. She is also the one who seduces Merlin so that he teaches her his magic and captures him in his own lair forever. These are mere steps in her revenge plan, which consists in using Merlin's magic to deceive her brother into conceiving a son with her who grabs him the kingdom, as Uther did with her father. Mordred is raised by Morgan in *Excalibur* to be Arthur's nemesis. From his youth, he devotes his life to kill the knights of the Round Table while these are in the search of the Grail. Morgan's education, training and magic prepares him for the moment when he faces his father to take his kingdom by force and usurp the condition of monarch. Nonetheless, as it happens in Malory's work, Mordred's betrayal is punished with his murder by his father.

Another convergence can be found by analyzing the Christian component on which both works are based. *Le Morte d'Arthur* presents a great number of Christian references, from the mentions of God, Jesus Christ and several saints of Christianity, to the mythical Holy Grail which holds the blood of Christ. The first Christian reference in *Le Morte d'Arthur* can be found in William Caxton's preface to the 1485 edition of sir Thomas Malory's work:

After that I had accomplished and finished divers histories, as well of contemplation as of other historical and worldly acts of great conquerors and princes, and also certain books of ensamples and doctrine, many noble and divers gentlemen of this realm of England came and demanded me many and oft times, wherefore that I have not do made and imprint the noble history of the Saint Greal, and of the most renowned Christian king, first and chief of the three best Christian, and worthy, King Arthur, which ought most to be remembered among us Englishmen to-fore all other Christian kings (Malory, 1994 [1485]: 27).

Malory himself makes the first Christian reference in the second chapter of the first book of *Le Morte d'Arthur* when Uther Pendragon asks Merlin for his help to lie with Igraine: "Sir, said Merlin, I know all your heart every deal; so ye will be sworn unto me as ye be a true king anointed, to fulfil my desire, ye shall have your desire. Then the king was sworn upon the Four Evangelists" (Malory, 1994 [1485]: 34, 35). The religiosity and faith were the eternal elements in medieval literature and culture which started to be associated to the knight's typical virtues and reflected, consequently, in the chivalry novel. The professor Carlos Alvar explains this particular fact:

En las primeras obras del género (Chrétien de Troyes y seguidores de su estilo) el ejercicio de la caballería conjuga elementos de procedencia diversa, tanto laicos como religiosos, bien de índole profesional, bien cultural. Conceder merced al adversario que se entrega, por ejemplo, responde a la moral utilitaria de la clase caballeresca (un enemigo vencido puede convertirse en un aliado fiel), pero la Iglesia deja sentir también su influencia a través de las virtudes cardinales antes mencionadas o en la justificación fundamental que concede al orden existente y a la función social, en él, de la caballería (servir al rey es servir a Dios). Por ello no es extraño que los caballeros acudan a misa por la mañana o se detengan a orar si encuentran una capilla en su camino. [...] El servicio a la dama y al rey queda relegado a un segundo plano ante la búsqueda trascendental del Grial. La caballería, como colectivo, se convierte ahora en instrumento de la materialización en la tierra del mensaje divino, en milicia de Cristo. Así, el caballero destinado a cumplir el sagrado misterio del Grial debe ser puro y casto (el virginal Galaz). Malory interpretará esta pureza en su rigor extremo: su Galahad entiende la satisfacción amorosa como un obstáculo para su alto llamado (Alvar, 1997: 48, 49).

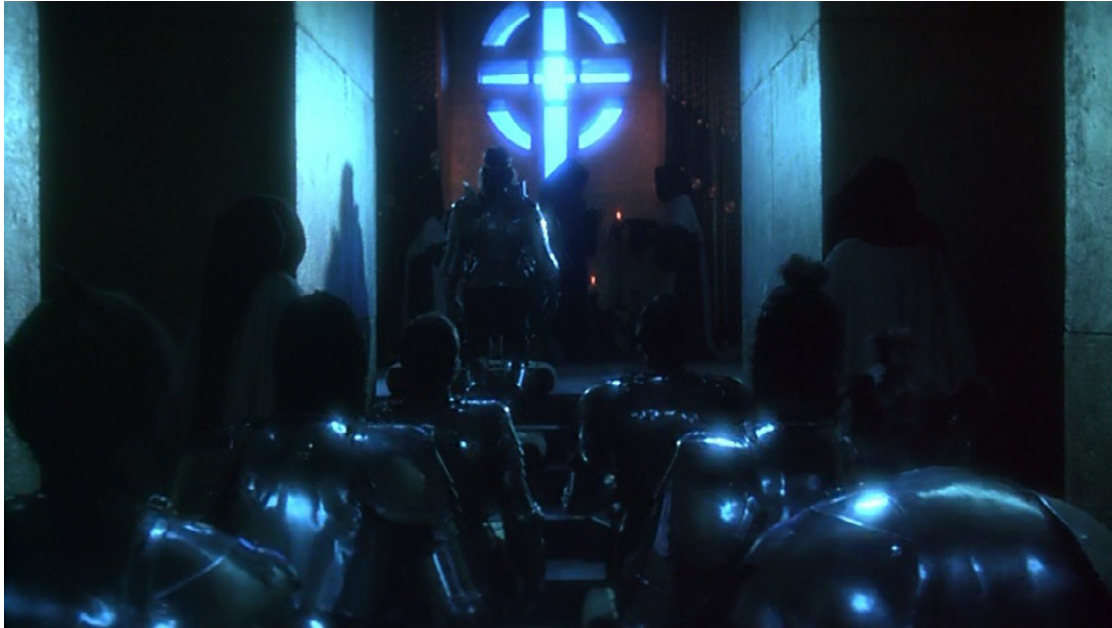
This chivalrous version, which is pervaded by the fundamentals of Christianity and characterized Malory's work, has been resumed by Boorman in order to establish in *Excalibur* the precepts on which king Arthur and his knights are based. An example of this reality is reflected in the code used by sir Uryens to name Arthur as a knight "in the name of God, Saint Michael and Saint George I give you the right to bear arms and the power to meet justice" (Boorman, 1981). Only in the sight of God, Arthur is named as a knight and recognized as king. Nevertheless, throughout the movie, references such as Christian masses and ceremonies and characters' prayers can be found as it is shown in picture 2. The first of these references which appear in the movie is during the just tournament to choose the worthy candidate of trying to take Excalibur out of the stone. The priest who guards the sword raises the following prayer:

God, send us a true king. We are unworthy but the land bleeds, the people suffer. We have sinned, but on this Easter Day when Christ rose from the dead, may one knight here through victory in arms find the grace to draw the sword and be king (Boorman, 1981).

During Arthur's reign, masses are held and trials by combat take place where the victor is the possessor of the truth in the sight of God.

**PICTURE 2**

A Christian mass in John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981)



Guenevere's trial is the best example in the film. The night before the trial, sir Lancelot raises the following prayer "Lord, we are innocent but not in our hearts. To hold her once in my arms, I would sacrifice everything: Honor. Truth, My sacred trust. God... save me from myself, purge me of this love so that I can defend her" (Boorman, 1981). Due to the fact that the lovers' infidelity has not been taken place yet, sir Lancelot is able to defeat, as in the sight of God there has not existed disloyalty yet. However, due to Lancelot's sinful thoughts, God does not permit him to finish sir Gawain off after the fight and he lies unconscious as a consequence of a blood loss through his injuries. These references to the influence of God in men's life appear in contrast to the ancient beliefs in disappearance. In fact, in *Excalibur* a transition between the eras can be noticed. The old gods and paganism are disappearing in favor of Christianity as the only valid religion. In Merlin's era, the esoteric and magic leads out to the word of God and the man. Andrea Ostrov Letania utters an interesting remark about how Boorman suggests this transition:

How did Northern Europeans go from pagan to Christian consciousness? That is a question for historians, but surviving artifacts can only teach us so much. Art can approach it from a psychological angle and a mythopoeic process; and John Boorman's *Excalibur* is among the greatest of such imaginative endeavors. Boorman's film is story of Northern European consciousness than of men. It begins in the world of nature, man, and magic. Nature is mysterious, beautiful, and cruel. Man is a part of this nature, but his intelligence and imagination lead him toward ideals outside nature [...]. What must prevail for there to be lasting peace is impersonal law and ideals

separate from the randomness of nature. *Excalibur* ends in a world which has yet to come under the domination of Christianity and legalism. It is a celebration of that cyclical world when man was cyclical along with nature, rising and falling, being born and growing, then decaying and dying. A world dark and dangerous but virile and magical. The rise of Christianity and legalism has provided man with a firm and stable system less dependent on personalities and on the ways of nature. Even when leaders are inferior and weather turns bad, we have the law and technology to maintain our social well-being. And, the belief in the one-and-only Almighty God provides us with an idea of a perfect and stable cosmic order—as opposed to the pagan view of spirituality linked closely with nature (Ostrov Letania, 2008).

The last convergence between Malory's work and Boorman's movie is linked to this separation of the supernatural and pagan world. Arthur's legendary sword is a magic weapon to which numerous qualities have been attributed along the history of literature and cinema. As Malory gathers in *Le Morte d'Arthur*, the Lady of the Lake gives Excalibur, together with its wonderful scabbard, to Arthur in exchange for a favor in due time. The mythical sword was imbued with the power of cutting through metal, since this is the meaning of its name according to the maid who gives Arthur the sword. The king himself recognizes the special property which makes his weapon unique in his fight against Accolon of Gaul:

And so they went eagerly to the battle, and gave many great strokes, but always Arthur's sword bit not like Accolon's sword; but for the most part, every stroke that Accolon gave he wounded sore Arthur, that it was marvel he stood, and always his blood fell from him fast. When Arthur beheld the ground so sore be-bled he was dismayed, and then he deemed treason that his sword was changed; for his sword bit not steel as it was wont to do, therefore he dreaded him sore to be dead, for ever him seemed that the sword in Accolon's hand was Excalibur, for at every stroke that Accolon struck he drew blood on Arthur (Malory, 1994 [1485]: 116).

Sources previous to Malory and on which the English writer based his work stated that the magic which Excalibur owned did not belong to this world and that its origin dated back to another period when Merlin crafted the powerful sword in the mysterious island of Avalon. This mention about the nature of the sword inspires in Boorman the decision of sharing the idea of Excalibur as an object which did not belong to this world. The origin of Excalibur is explained by means of Merlin's words in the movie: "Behold the sword of power. Excalibur. Forged when the world was Young and bird, and beast, and flower were one with man and death was but a dream" (Boorman, 1981). Hence, Excalibur belongs to an era prior to the characters and mankind: the era of old gods related to nature and paganism. The use of an unnatural green light reflected in the edge of Excalibur is the director's method to translate through intersemiotics and transmute the text into images. This technique is a characteristic signature of Boorman's style as a director, which makes him completely unique:

Despite all that, and story and performances aside, *Excalibur* would remain just another King Arthur movie if not for Boorman's visual style. Using the simplest of low-fi practical lighting, op-

tical effects, and in-camera trickery, he created an otherworldly atmosphere that is both earthy (all the grunting and squeaking and clanging and mud) and mythically luminous (Knipfel, 2019).

The color of this unexpected brilliance in the blade of Excalibur, which is associated with that mythical nature coming from ancestral era, emerges when a magic or supernatural element appears in the scene. The appearance of the sword through the waters gripped by the Lady of the Lake, as it is depicted in picture 3, is one of the most recognizable moments in the Arthurian legend. Boorman also uses this emerald twinkle when Arthur inappropriately utilizes the characteristic power of Excalibur to pierce the steel in the fight against sir Lancelot as it is shown in picture 4. Arthur calls on the hidden power which resides inside Excalibur and the sword cuts in two pieces the steel with which sir Lancelot's weapon is forged and sunder the breastplate and the knight's body equally.

### PICTURE 3

Excalibur emerges from the lake gripped by the Lady of the Lake in John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981)



This study of the convergences inevitably leads to a similarity in Malory's and Boorman's works. The British director faced the arduous task of turning Malory's vast work into a length of footage needed to tell the story of Arthur and his knights, but attractive for the contemporary audience at the same time. Consequently, Boorman had to develop a compilation work for his movie, which was similar to that made by Malory though the material of the Arthurian legend of the sources at his disposal. Malory wrote a work which would summarize the immense legend of king Arthur, taking the stories he considered as convenient and sufficiently relevant for the plot development and dismissing the superfluous or disjointed



**PICTURE 4**

Arthur calls on the hidden power which resides inside Excalibur in John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981)



ones. Likewise, Boorman took those chapters which set the central axis of Arthur's myth and cast those aside which would be distorted and without meaning for the modern audience, keeping the genuine essence of the legend in the process. Through the analysis of the convergences between Malory's and Boorman's works, the director's commitment to create an accurate movie adaptation to the text from which it is adapted can be noticed. The intersemiotic translation of the elements described in the novel entailed a challenge for Boorman, which he successfully overcame. The quality and coherence of the transmutation of the chapters into scenes have turned *Excalibur* into a cult movie.

#### **4. Intersemiotics and movie adaptation: divergences with sir Thomas Malory's *Le Mort d'Arthur***

The movie adaptation of a medieval literary work is a task which involves serious difficulties, starting from the point in which Malory did not conceive *Le Morte d'Arthur* as a work to be theatrically represented, or even imagine the infinite possibilities which the miracle of the cinema would offer. As if the difficulty of the adaptation of a medieval work from a 20th century director's perspective was not enough, it is essential to take into account the great sociologic and economic differences of the societies from so unlike centuries and how these influence the audience's reception. Nonetheless, the cinema owns that inherent magic which is able to turn the impossible into possible and John Boorman knows how to awaken. During the process of the intersemiotic translation of the script based on *Le Morte*

*d'Arthur*, the director made the decision of carrying out a series of changes in the original story of Malory's work with the purpose of creating a feasible movie within the parameters of the language of the cinema, an attractive and understandable version for the contemporary audience and an economically profitable production. Hence, the aim of this section consists in analyzing the divergences of *Excalibur* and *Le Morte d'Arthur* arisen as a consequence of these changes which show Boorman's particular style as a director.

The first divergence appears in the setting where Boorman places the story of his film. Throughout Malory's work—as well as William Caxton's preface in 1485—there exist multiple references to towns and counties belonging to the geography of the United Kingdom. Malory locates the adventures of king Arthur and his noble knights in a past moment of the Middle Ages in the British Isles. The Christian references previously mentioned make us understand that the land described by Malory is identical to the one which the reader receives in his work. Camelot, Arthur's legendary court, seems to be located in current Winchester, as in the 21st chapter of the second book of *Le Morte d'Arthur*, after brothers Balin and Balan's tragic death, Malory writes:

Also Merlin let make by his subtilty that Balin's sword was put in a marble stone standing upright as great as a mill stone, and the stone hove always above the water and did many years, and so by adventure it swam down the stream to the City of Camelot, that is in English Winchester (Malory, 1994 [1485]: 89).

The reason why Malory establishes his work in the land where he lived is due to a mix of the patriotic component to make the mythic king Arthur a real character and eulogize the history of the United Kingdom, as well as the lack of awareness of the historical truth. It should be reminded that it was not until the Renaissance when the credibility of *The History of the Kings of Britain (Historia Regum Britanniae)*—one of Malory's main sources—was disdained as reliable chronicle of the history of the United Kingdom. Otherwise, this precision of names does not appear in Boorman's movie because of the lack of mentions to the country or towns beyond Camelot and "the land". The conquest of this "land" to unify it under a single crown is the greatest ambition of the different kings and warlords and consequently the main cause of the numerous battles which devastate the territory. This completely intentional absence of names which help the audience place the story powerfully draws attention. The British director's purpose is to transport the audience to another distant world, as he explains:

What I'm doing is setting it in a world, a period, of the imagination [...]. I'm trying to suggest a kind of Middle Earth, in Tolkien terms. It's a contiguous world; it's like ours but different. I want it to have a primal clarity, a sense that things are happening for the first time. Landscape and nature and human emotions are all fresh. I tell the actors that they are not reenacting a legend. They are creating it, and so they themselves don't know what's going to happen—it's unfolding (Kennedy, 1981: 3).

In Boorman's words (1981), the story is not narrated from the perspective of a historical truth, but from a mythic one. Therefore, the world of *Excalibur* is not, by the director's



own definition, the same as the world in *Le Morte d'Arthur*, but a reflection of the real one where everything is possible and it is still unknown. A primal place and time in which it seems that the human beings unleash their emotions for the very first time and love, hatred, pride and anger are felt in a much more intense way, thus conditioning the characters. Nonetheless, there is a really unique and particular fact, which is the treatment given to Camelot by both authors. Highly remarkable is the fact that within the precision of Malory's setting there was not any other description of the mythical Camelot itself but that it was placed near a river, as it is gathered in the second chapter of the tenth book when sir Tristan arranges to meet sir Palomides "in the meadow by the river of Camelot, where Merlin set the peron" (Malory, 1994 [1485]: 373). In this case, the tide seems to have turned, since in *Excalibur* Boorman decides to recreate from his imagination the legendary court due to the absolute necessity of creating a setting where the immense majority of the plot takes place. Camelot in *Excalibur* is a fortress with walls of gold and silver, which is located in a valley by the shore of a lake. It is the headquarters of king Arthur and queen Guenevere and of the order of the knights of the Round Table. It is configured as the nucleus of humanity and, within its walls, its inhabitants live with prosperity in the new era of mankind while they enjoy the peace which king Arthur's kingdom has brought to them and they feel curiosity to study everything which surrounds them. It is a cosmopolitan town inhabited by the kings, knights and the court, as well as artisans, artists, alchemists and astrologers which shape the combination of anachronisms that surround king Arthur's legend and the chivalric romance as it appears in picture 5.

#### PICTURE 5

A cosmopolitan Camelot in John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981)



The action temporality of the movie follows a linear progression and it is characterized by periods of temporary inaccuracy which are frequent in medieval literature. As the movie states in the first seconds, the story of *Excalibur* initially starts in the Dark Ages. This period of history refers to the transition between the fall of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the Early Middle Ages. However, the armors carried by the knights, as well as the castles and the concept of the order of chivalry lead to the thought that, when Boorman decided to set the action in the movie during the Dark Ages, he referred to the term coined by popular culture to the Middle Ages in general. During the movie, the director shows the passage of years through the physical appearance of characters. The director himself commented the technique used in the movie in the interview given to Harlan Kennedy:

When Uther thrusts the sword in the stone and then dies, we cut straight to the same scene eighteen years later. I shot the first in winter; then I shot it again in spring when all the trees were in leaf. Boom! Though it was only a seasonal change, it's a very startling one, and then I panned around with the camera, and you see that all this encampment you're looking at to-day has grown up and around it. That's a passage of eighteen years in one cut, and it gave the story enormous dynamic power. [...] Instead of a time lapse cut on a land-scape, I'd make the transition happen on a character's face. There's a point when I go from the young Arthur with Guinevere straight to a scene, years later, in which he meets Lancelot. In that scene Arthur has sprouted a beard, and you suddenly see him behaving very much like his father, Uther. Similarly, when Morgana kisses the young Mordred, I show their heads moving apart, and after a moment you realize that ten years have gone by within that embrace and Mordred is now a fully grown man (Kennedy, 1981: 3).

The only direct mention of a specific temporality is stated by means of Morgan's words when she reveals to sir Perceval that he has been looking for the Grail for ten years and a day. Boorman himself regarded these leaps forward in time as the best way to speed up the plot and concentrate all the Arthurian material he wanted in a reasonable time of footage.

Another divergent element between Boorman and Malory's works is the treatment of the knights' idleness in times of peace. This element is shared, in turn, by Noble Prize in Literature John Steinbeck in *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*, his literary adaptation of Malory's work. If we consider that few more reasons than the weariness seem to promote sir Lancelot's resolve of going on adventures with his nephew sir Lionel in *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Boorman decides to elaborate on the reasons by which the knight leaves Camelot, bestowing a greater emotional depth to the character. After the victory against sir Gawain in the trial by combat, and once the queen's honor is restored, sir Lancelot and Arthur observe how the knights of the court drink, challenge their strength and eat without moderation. Arthur notices the knight's face of displeasure and hold the following conversation: "—They miss the battlefield. I think we do, too. —We have lost our way, Arthur. —It is not easy for them without the hard teaching of war and quest" (Boorman, 1981). Nevertheless, the trigger that makes sir Lancelot leave Camelot are Merlin's words which, in front of the whole court, praise how important is the truth in a knight. As his heart was invaded by a feeling of guilt

caused by his prohibited love towards Guenevere, sir Lancelot tells Arthur that he departs to the forest to recover from his wound, a latent metaphor of the knight's inner suffering.

Changes in some characters' role in opposition to Malory's work can be noticed throughout the film. Boorman made these changes with the aim of accelerating and simplifying the narration, creating by this means a significant divergence which modifies Malory's story to some extent. The most characteristic case of the character's roles change found in *Excalibur* is the character of Morgan. The role interpreted by Helen Mirren is the combination of three characters that gathers the characteristics of each one of them. To begin with, Morgan is the name of one of the three daughters of the duke of Cornwall Gorlois and Igraine. In *Le Morte d'Arthur* it is said that, after Uther Pendragon's ascension to the throne, he sent his stepdaughter, who was only a child, to a convent where it is said that "she learned so much that she was a great clerk of necromancy<sup>2</sup>" (Malory, 1994 [1485]: 40). As a result of this training, Morgan Le Fay learnt a great variety of perverse enchantments and the elaboration of alchemical compounds which she uses to cheat and ultimately conspire against king Arthur and his knights. In *Excalibur*, the character of Morgan was born with the gift of magic and under Merlin's training she learns the secrets of alchemy and powerful enchantments such as the Charm of Making, which she uses to favor king Arthur's downfall.

The second character which forms the character is Morgawse, Igraine and Gorlois's second daughter and Morgan Le Fay's sister. After the duke of Cornwall's death, Uther wanted to get rid of his daughter by marrying her to one of his vassals, the king Lot of Lothian and Orkney, with the purpose of strengthen their alliance. In the ninth chapter of the first book of *Le Morte d'Arthur*, when Arthur consolidates himself as the legitimate heir to the throne, king Lot does not accept him and sends his wife Morgawse with the young monarch to spy him. Arthur is shocked with Morgawse's beauty, with whom he lies without knowing she is his half-sister and who gives birth later to Mordred as a result of their incestuous relationship. On the contrary, in *Excalibur*, as in T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* and in other modern versions of the Arthurian legend, Morgan is the one who lies with Arthur using a trickery and who conceives Mordred as a result. The third character who shapes Morgan is Nimue. In the first chapter of the fourth book of Malory's work, Nimue is the Lady of the Lake with whom Merlin is in love and take as his apprentice, teaching her all his magic to impress her and gain her favor by this means. Nonetheless, Nimue, jaded because of the sorcerer's harassment to lie with her and after learning all the necessary from him, casts a

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2 In the definition of *necromancy* registered in the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* two meanings of the term are accepted: 1. the practice of claiming to communicate by magic with the dead in order to learn about the future. 2. the use of magic powers, especially evil ones. Thus, Malory refers to the second meaning of the term, as the magic Morgan Le Fay conjures in *Le Morte d'Arthur* is more related to the illusionism and trickery.

spell over Merlin, which imprisons him during all the eternity in a hole under a big stone. Otherwise, in the movie Morgan takes the role of Merlin's apprentice, to whom she seduces to learn all his magic and to whom she finally captures in his underground lair when he is no more useful for her aims.

Another character who suffers a change of role in the film is sir Perceval. In *Le Morte d'Arthur* sir Galahad, sir Lancelot of the Lake's son, is the only knight who is pure enough to see the Grail and solve its mystery. Nevertheless, in *Excalibur*, sir Perceval is configured as the knight who achieves to accomplish the quest for the Holy Grail. This fact evinces that Boorman made the decision of basing the character in the French version of Chrétien de Troyes of *Perceval, the Story of the Grail*, in which the knight defines himself as the one who finds it. The way in which Boorman carries out Perceval's intersemiotic translation is clearly influenced by his signature style as a director. During the search of the Grail, Boorman considers Perceval the archetype of the survivor who faces the extreme conditions given by nature. This element is repeated in the protagonist characters of the films *Deliverance* and *Hell in the Pacific*. God seems to guide and take care of him along the long and hard path, as when he is about to die hanged and the spurs with the shape of Christ's cross cut the rope which was strangling him. The character evolution is remarkable and it goes through different stages. Sir Perceval starts as a rogue; he is ordered as knight and he is only able to solve the Grail mystery when he gets rid of all the material possessions which tie him to the world. Without his weapon and armor, and only humbly dressed with a perizoma or loincloth, he represents a messianic image who shares his cup with Arthur, saving him from all sins. Another change of role in this character can be found at the end of the film, when Arthur ends up gravely injured in the battle where he kills Mordred and sends sir Perceval to throw Excalibur into a lake of calm waters. The knight disobeys once, so he comes back with his sword to his king, who demands him to throw it by assuring him that the sword will emerge from the waters when there is a king again. Sir Perceval is convinced and fulfils this time Arthur's last will before leaving to Avalon. In *Le Morte d'Arthur*, the only survivors in the battle of Camlann are Arthur and sir Bedivere, being the later the one who throws Excalibur into the lake after disobeying Arthur's last will in two occasions.

Throughout Boorman's movie, other minor changes in characters take place at specific times which, in this case, do not greatly affect the plot of the story. An example of these changes is noticed in the detail of placing Uther Pendragon as the first bearer of Excalibur. Thus, Uther begins the story of the legendary sword, whose legacy is continued by his son Arthur. Another change can be observed in the scene where Arthur sends sir Lancelot, his best knight, to escort Guenevere to Camelot and marry her there. Nonetheless, in Malory's work, Arthur's trust to perform this task relies on his adviser Merlin:

Then Merlin desired of the king for to have men with him that should enquire of Guenever, and so the king granted him, and Merlin went forth unto King Leodegrance of Cameliard, and told

him of the desires of the king that he would have unto his wife Guenever his daughter. [...] And so Leodegrance delivered his daughter Guenever unto Merlin, and the Table Round with the hundred knights, and so they rode freshly, with great royalty, what by water and what by land, till that they came nigh unto London (Malory, 1994 [1485]: 90, 91).

This change in Boorman's work gives the director the opportunity of establishing the beginning of the love between sir Lancelot and Guenevere and digging into the romance by means of the conversation held by the characters. At that moment, sir Lancelot confesses his love towards Guenevere, a fact which modifies the way in which both characters behave each time they share a scene. Malory completely bases sir Lancelot's relationship towards Guenevere on the literary concept of courtly love. The knight tries to please the queen, loving her in a noble way with a total submission—until the extreme of idealizing her—culminating in the so-called joyful suffering. Guenevere is the one who controls the situation, enabling his knight to intimate with her in her convenience. Nevertheless, the romance between the lovers changes the role of the dominant character in *Excalibur*. Boorman depicts sir Lancelot as the one who keeps Guenevere far so as not to be tempted. By this means, the queen puts all her efforts in spending time with his beloved knight, but sir Lancelot leaves the court frequently so as not to be in her presence and feed this forbidden love. This change in the relationship of the characters distances itself from Malory's concept of courtly love. As a consequence of this alteration, Boorman decides to culminate sir Lancelot and Guenevere's romance with a completely artistic divergence from Malory's work. Arthur discovers the lovers in the forest and he stabs Excalibur between them then, favoring the beginning of the end through the figure of the sword lying between the lovers which appears in Tristan and Isolde.

Finally, Merlin is the last character who suffers from a subtle modification in a particular scene. During the siege of sir Leondegrance's castle which appears in *Excalibur*, it can be observed how Merlin takes part in the battle, by giving instructions so that Arthur strategically places a rope with a hook in one of the siege towers which attacks the fortress. The sorcerer hurries to tie the other end of the rope in a carriage pulled by two horses which, when they receive Merlin's whisper, hurry to pull with great strength and knock the tower down, which was full of knights who were climbing it at that moment. This is an unusual event since, in *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Merlin never participates in a battle directly. The place of the sorcerer is always far from the first line of the battle, where his characteristic magic is more effective. This combative way of representing Merlin evinces the influence that J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* had on Boorman. The scene of the siege of Leondegrance's castle is set as a reminiscence of the battle of Helm's Deep. In Tolkien's work, the wizard Gandalf fights the horde of enemies with Aragorn, the unknown and legitimate heir to the throne of Gondor, to defend Hornburg's fortress, where the king Théoden is sheltered. In turn, in Boorman's work Merlin can be observed in his fight against the knights, hand-in-hand with Arthur, the unknown heir to the throne, to defend the castle of king Leondegrance.

Nonetheless, Merlin's combative nature in literature has recently reached a new dimension after the discovery in the beginning of 2019 of seven fragments from the 8th century inside a French manuscript found in the Central Library of the University of Bristol. In these fragments written in Old French, a version of the battle of Trèbes is described where Merlin, after rallying Arthur's troops with an inspiring speech, takes the dragon banner of sir Kay, which exhales fire magically, and heads the charge against king Claudas' troops. Despite the fact that it cannot be claimed that these fragments were part of the sources that sir Thomas Malory had at his disposal to elaborate *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Leah Tether, president of the British Branch of the International Arthurian Society, has concluded after a detailed analysis that there are signs to think so by indicating that the fragments could belong to the *Vulgate Suite de Merlin*:

These fragments of the Story of Merlin are a wonderfully exciting find, which may have implications for the study not just of this text but also of other related and later texts that have shaped our modern understanding of the Arthurian legend (Tether, 2019).

Throughout this journey along the divergences which share *Le Morte d'Arthur* and *Excalibur* it has been confirmed that Boorman has left his mark in the process of the movie adaptation of Malory's work. Hence, this article demonstrates that Boorman's style as a director creates a noticeable impact in the way in which the intersemiotic translation is carried out. Precisely, the modifications of the original story suggested by the English director are added with grace to king Arthur's legend and they are not seen as a pastiche of Malory's work. The dialogues created by the director grant the characters with a greater depth and face them to moral dilemmas proper both of the Middle Ages and nowadays. One of the achievements which can be attributed to Boorman is, without a doubt, conferring the characters with a unique personality when a great number of them wear an armor which make them physically equal to the rest in appearance. Nonetheless, Boorman's greatest landmark consists in making the critics and the audience agree on accepting that, despite the artistic alterations from which the story suffers, *Excalibur* is the most accurate version of all movie adaptations of king Arthur and his noble knights.

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