

“STUFF OF FUTURE MEMORY”: An Analysis of the Reconstruction of Myth,  
specifically Arthurian Legend in John Boorman’s film, *Excalibur* (1981).

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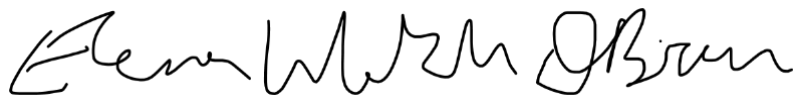
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### **Declaration of Originality**

**This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Film DL843. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.**

**Signed**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eleni W. M. Brown". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Eleni" being the most prominent.

## Abstract

This thesis explores John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981) as not only a unique adaptation of Arthurian legend but also as a singular adaptation of myth itself. By exploring how the film reconstructs myth through narrative choices, visual storytelling, and its use of nostalgia, I will determine that *Excalibur* is an unparalleled triumph in visual adaptation.

Drawing primarily from Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Boorman and co-writer Rospo Pallenberg condense centuries of legend into a cohesive cinematic experience through time jumps and amalgamations of characters. The research also investigates Boorman's departure from contemporary heroic narratives and his use of Jungian archetypes.

In terms of the making of *Excalibur* this thesis explores the balances of historical ambiguity with artistic interpretation and the significance of nature as a setting, as well as navigating visual composition in reinforcing mythological themes that impact the characters.

Furthermore, the thesis contrasts *Excalibur*'s initial critical reception with its growing cult status, arguing that its anachronistic aesthetics and symbolic depth have granted it a lasting place in the plethora of Arthurian adaptations. The unpredictable grip that time has had on the film leads the thesis back to the use of nostalgia in Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. In addition, the distinction from King Arthur as a mythic hero and not a narrative one will further separate *Excalibur* from other interpretations of the King's character.

Ultimately, by exploring the writing, production, and ageing of this mythical adaptation, I will establish *Excalibur* as a singular achievement in adaptation, one that does not only retell legend but reaches a status of legend itself.

## **Table of Contents**

<b>Introduction:</b>	<i>BEFORE LEGEND, BEFORE EXCALIBUR</i>	_____	<i>Page 5</i>
<b>Chapter 1:</b>	<i>ADAPTATION: THE SCRIPT</i>	_____	<i>Page 11</i>
<b>Chapter 2:</b>	<i>INTERPRETATION: THE MAKING</i>	_____	<i>Page 22</i>
<b>Chapter 3:</b>	<i>BECOMING LEGEND</i>	_____	<i>Page 32</i>
<b>Chapter 4:</b>	<i>HERO</i>	_____	<i>Page 43</i>
<b>Conclusion:</b>	<i>ONE TO RULE THEM ALL</i>	_____	<i>Page 49</i>
<b>References</b>		_____	<i>Page 53</i>

***Introduction:***

***BEFORE LEGEND, BEFORE EXCALIBUR***

Before *Excalibur*, John Boorman had spent six months writing an adaptation of J.R.R Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* with screenwriting collaborator Rospo Pallenberg. Had the film been made it is likely that *Excalibur* would never have come to fruition. Tim Pelan explains, "During this time United Artists, who intended to make the film, suffered several financial setbacks and got cold feet. They ended up giving it to Ralph Bakshi, who made his truncated animated version. To gain full artistic control for Bakshi's approach, Boorman's script was purchased by UA, for a reputed \$3 million."<sup>1</sup> The sacrifice of Boorman's vision of The Shire and Mordor meant that he could now turn his focus on not adapting literature, but on adapting legend.

Leading up to the release of *Excalibur*, films such as *Lancelot du Lac*<sup>2</sup> by Robert Bresson and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*<sup>3</sup> were the most recognised recent features inspired by Arthurian legend. Both films are wildly different from each other, and completely distinct when compared to *Excalibur* after its release. This shows the flexibility of the Arthurian myth and how different directors may bend and remould primary sources as they see fit in order to fit their own unique narrative. Boorman's interest in adaptation stems from the malleability of the Arthurian legend, as Pelan once again muses that "Myths survive, Boorman believes, be-cause

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<sup>1</sup> Pelan, Tim. "'The Past, Present and Future of Humanity': John Boorman's *Excalibur*." *Cinephilia & Beyond*, 16 Dec. 2024, [cinephiliabeyond.org](http://cinephiliabeyond.org).

<sup>2</sup> Bresson, Robert, director. *Lancelot du Lac*. Gaumont, 1974

<sup>3</sup> Gilliam, Terry, and Terry Jones, directors. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. EMI Films, 1975.

they're stories that stand retelling... The retelling of these stories is like the rediscovery of them.”<sup>4</sup>

However, it also means that while the Arthurian legend is the biggest influence on each adaptation (specifically Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*<sup>5</sup> in the case of *Excalibur*), there is also the possibility that future film adaptations are being influenced by previous attempts as explained by Lorraine Stock, “...filmmakers' adaptations of the sword extraction almost invariably reference other cinematic interpretations rather than those publicly acknowledged textual sources.”<sup>6</sup>

However, while Lorraine pinpoints the “sword extraction” explicitly, Brian Hoyle speaks about this topic from a different perspective when he says, “the immense popularity of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* perhaps made it difficult for Boorman to imagine that audiences could ever take the legends entirely seriously.”<sup>7</sup> This was a rational concern since *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* had parodied its predecessor *Lancelot du Lac* in the infamous ‘Black Knight’ scene.

The influence of Monty Python's adaptation has a knock-on effect on *Excalibur* seen especially in the character of Merlin, played by Nicol Williamson. “So, while

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<sup>4</sup> Pelan, Tim. “‘The Past, Present and Future of Humanity’: John Boorman's *Excalibur*.” *Cinephilia & Beyond*, 16 Dec. 2024, [cinephiliabeyond.org](http://cinephiliabeyond.org).

<sup>5</sup> Malory, Thomas. *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Edited by Stephen H. A. Shepherd, W.W. Norton, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Stock, L. K. "Reinventing an Iconic Arthurian Moment: The Sword in the Stone in Films and Television." *Arthuriana*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2015, pp. 66–83. [JSTOR](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4491111).

<sup>7</sup> Hoyle, Brian. *The Cinema of John Boorman*. Scarecrow Press, 2012. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1042018>.

Merlin is called upon to educate and advise Arthur, to predict the future, and to articulate some of the film's more serious points... he is also the film's key source of comic relief."<sup>8</sup> One of the most notable and bizarre scenes illustrating this is Merlin's attempt at fishing in a river, which results in him falling into the water in a rather undignified manner.

From the very inception of Boorman's plan to adapt Arthurian Myth, he had already set himself apart from filmmakers before him and those after. He did so by deciding to retell the full Arthurian cycle on screen. According to Boorman, *Excalibur*, "...would have made for a four-and-a-half-hour film..."<sup>9</sup> However, it was obvious that changes needed to be made in order for *Excalibur* to be a successful cinematic adaptation. In four chapters, I will be exploring John Boorman's own quest for a successful adaptation and how that quest influenced the decisions he made on his path to mythic greatness.

In the first chapter, *ADAPTATION*, I will be exploring the ways in which Boorman and screenwriting collaborator Pallenberg adapted the Arthurian legend as told by Thomas Mallory in *Le Morte d'Arthur*, in its entirety. I will explore the possible divergence of contemporary storytelling techniques such as the cinematic Hero's Journey, as well as the influence of Carl Jung's archetypes. In terms of characters,

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<sup>8</sup> Hoyle, Brian. *The Cinema of John Boorman*. Scarecrow Press, 2012. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1042018>.

<sup>9</sup> Boorman, John. *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.



I will be exploring the exclusion and amalgamation of characters from Arthurian legend to create key characters in *Excalibur* such as Morgana and Perceval.

In terms of timeline, I want to explore the way in which Boorman and Pallenberg were able to omit unnecessary years of Arthurian legend from getting in the way of a narrative, ensuring that the story would be easily digestible to modern audiences. The goal of this chapter will be to understand the foundations that Boorman and Pallenberg constructed from which Boorman could then build his Arthurian kingdom from.

In the second chapter, *INTERPRETATION*, I will be exploring the decisions made in the production of *Excalibur*. I want to explore the choice and importance of locations such as the forest. In exploring the forest's importance, I hope to uncover the thematic weight that the location carries in terms of the ties between the King and his land. In addition, I would like to explore the camerawork in terms of lighting and movement which accentuates the mysticism of the film, separating it from the world we live in and know so well and how it separates itself from previous Arthurian cinema.

This will lead to the investigation into the anachronistic approach to costume and production design which highlights the idea that historical inaccuracy leads to cinematic accuracy. That due to its artistic freedom the film connects with contemporary audience's understanding of the Arthurian myth and therefore it allows them to relate with what is shown on screen. The outcome of this chapter will be to relish in the cinematic construction of Arthurian legend from the lighting down to the production design influenced by Boorman himself. Ultimately, it will

explore how Boorman understood the importance in adapting legend and not history.

The third chapter *AFTER EXCALIBUR*, will be about learning to understand the growing appreciation for the film by analysing reviews of *Excalibur* upon its initial release in contrast with the reviews of today's audience. By comparing and contrasting these reviews, I will make the argument that *Excalibur* has slowly transcended into its own mythological status through its use of nostalgia that is not dissimilar to Thomas Mallory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. By the end of this paper, it should be clear that John Boorman's *Excalibur* is one of the most unique feats of adaptation in cinematic history, the likes of which that hasn't been seen since.

In conclusion, the final chapter *HERO*, will be revisiting the abstract question of this thesis and discovering what sets *Excalibur* apart as the truest adaptation of myth in its creation of King Arthur as a hero written for screen and as a hero that retains his mythological significance through characterisation and the film's rejection of a more contemporary hero's journey. By the end of this paper, it should be clear that John Boorman's *Excalibur* is one of the most unique feats of adaptation in cinematic history, the likes of which haven't been seen since.

*Chapter 1:*

*ADAPTATION: THE SCRIPT*

Of all the tellings of King Arthur and the round table, there must be a particular reason why Boorman decided to use Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* as his primary source for *Excalibur*. Of course, *Le Morte d'Arthur* isn't the only source that he used, there are also elements of Chrétien de Troyes' writings as well as the aforementioned, *Lord of the Rings*, as explained by Boorman, "I'm trying to suggest a kind of Middle Earth, in Tolkien terms. It's a contiguous world; it's like ours but different."<sup>10</sup> However, the parallels between Malory and Boorman's work are undeniable as it "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*."<sup>11</sup>

One of the ways in which this was proven, as Helen Fulton explains, "Boorman reproduces Malory's method of paralleling themes and events with examples later in the narrative."<sup>12</sup> This is evident in the parallel between King Arthur and, later his son Mordred. Both of which were conceived under the guise of the concealment of identity. Another example is when Arthur drives the sword Excalibur into the ground at the discovery of his wife Guinevere and best friend Lancelot's betrayal. This mirrors his earlier claim to the throne when he first pulled Excalibur from the

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<sup>10</sup> Kennedy, Harlan. "EXCALIBUR: John Boorman – in Interview." *American Cinema Papers*, 1981, [americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm](http://americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm).

<sup>11</sup> Mate, V. J. L. M. "Transmutation in John Boorman's *Excalibur*: Accuracy and Intersemiotic Translation in the Movie Adaptation of *Le Morte d'Arthur*." *ONOMÁZEIN*, vol. 62, no. 1, 2023, pp. 187–208.

<sup>12</sup> Fulton, Helen, editor. *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*. John Wiley & Sons, 2009. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4026444>.

stone. However, as Helen Fulton recognises, “In *Excalibur*, the supernatural, the magic, and the prophetic overwhelm the chivalric element of Malory’s text.”<sup>13</sup>

What truly ties Malory and Boorman together? A description of Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* by Fulton offers a strong connection. “The Morte was actually a latecomer in the medieval Arthurian tradition, built on the work of many predecessors...”<sup>14</sup> When Malory was writing *Le Morte d’Arthur*, he essentially wrote an ultimate compilation of all the English and French retellings of Arthurian Legend up to that point. As explained by Brian Hoyle, “In short, he tried to consolidate the legends by drawing on all that had come before, embellishing and adding or omitting and conflating, as he saw fit. This is just what Boorman has done in his film, taking the existing literary, artistic, theatrical, and cinematic incarnations of the legend and bringing them together in one place.”<sup>15</sup>

In addition, the element of nostalgia ties the two pieces of work together. It is something that features in a lot of Arthurian cinema because “a sense of nostalgia for a lost past percolates throughout many medievalist endeavors, in that the turn

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<sup>13</sup> Fulton, Helen, editor. *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*. John Wiley & Sons, 2009. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4026444>.

<sup>14</sup> Fulton, Helen, editor. *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*. John Wiley & Sons, 2009. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4026444>.

<sup>15</sup> Hoyle, Brian. *The Cinema of John Boorman*. Scarecrow Press, 2012. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1042018>.

to history often reveals a sense of discontentment with the present.”<sup>16</sup> Boorman’s approach to *Excalibur* was to create something timeless and yet would somehow remind the audience of simpler times, as he himself explains, “It seemed to me a won-derful idea that you could remake the world, hopefully a bit better, braver, and more beautiful than it was presented to us.”<sup>17</sup>

The hero’s journey is one that has been prevalent in myth and legend since time began. In relation to King Arthur there are many similarities between himself, and the hero outlined in Joseph Campbell’s book, *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*. An example being, King Arthur’s unique abilities as an almost Jesus like messenger of God as “He is the ultimate priest and king, wielder of both the spiritual and secular swords.”<sup>18</sup> Due to these similarities, one would assume that Boorman would have kept to a contemporary Hero’s Journey that cinema had crafted over the years.

However, Boorman’s desire to encompass the full Arthurian cycle meant he had to abandon the cinematic Hero’s Journey narratively. If the film had followed the contemporary Hero’s Journey, it would have ended with the conception of the Round Table, Arthur having achieved, as Campell calls it, his “Freedom to Live.”<sup>19</sup> However, the film continues, leading to the demise of King Arthur and his kingdom

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<sup>16</sup> Pugh, Tison, and Angela Weisl. *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2012. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1074983>.

<sup>17</sup> Kennedy, Harlan. “EXCALIBUR: John Boorman – in Interview.” *American Cinema Papers*, 1981, [americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm](http://americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm).

<sup>18</sup> Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Pantheon Books, 1949.

<sup>19</sup> Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Pantheon Books, 1949.

of Camelot as, “Boorman’s aim is to show the negative forces of rumour and jealousy that have entered the society of the Round Table... through luxury and indolence brought on by success.”<sup>20</sup>

A contemporary narrative tool that Boorman followed perhaps more closely than the cinematic Hero’s Journey, is Carl Jung’s archetypes. This is because Boorman viewed the making of *Excalibur* as his own quest. As Roberta Davidson explains, “Boorman defines himself, in Jungian terms, as a figure in the process of 'becoming' as much as any hero he constructs.”<sup>21</sup> This perspective carries over into the writing of *Excalibur*, becoming especially prevalent in the main character of the film, King Arthur. At first glance, it seems that King Arthur simply fits into the archetype of the hero- someone who overcomes and achieves.

However, according to Davidson, “Arthur is simply the traditional image of the warrior king: stern, strong, aloof in every instance.”<sup>22</sup> The function of the King archetype apart from order and principle, is to provide for his kingdom. The idea of nurturance is very prevalent in Arthur, especially in his creation of the Round Table,

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<sup>20</sup> Fulton, Helen, editor. *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*. John Wiley & Sons, 2009.

ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4026444>.

<sup>21</sup> Davidson, Roberta. “The ‘Reel’ Arthur: Politics and Truth Claims in *Camelot*, *Excalibur*, and *King Arthur*.” *Arthuriana*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2007, pp. 62–84. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27870837>.

<sup>22</sup> Davidson, Roberta. “The ‘Reel’ Arthur: Politics and Truth Claims in *Camelot*, *Excalibur*, and *King Arthur*.” *Arthuriana*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2007, pp. 62–84. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27870837>.

which was “a symbol of brotherhood and equality.”<sup>23</sup> The creation of the round table also invokes the Warrior archetype within Arthur demonstrating his, “capacity for aggression, but not in a destructive way.”<sup>24</sup> King Arthur never uses violence as his first resort, a lesson he learned when he met Lancelot, a young and talented knight. When Arthur realised that he was losing his duel against Lancelot, he called upon Excalibur to use its powers to help him win. In doing so, he shatters the unbreakable sword Excalibur and almost kills Lancelot in the process.

Apart from the Jungian archetypes impacting the characters of *Excalibur*, the need to tell the full Arthurian cycle also impacted many of the characters in the script. As Boorman himself confessed, “You see, I was determined 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.”<sup>25</sup>

In order to keep the runtime of *Excalibur* down to two and a half hours, certain characters had to either be completely excluded or amalgamated into someone new. Within *Excalibur* there are two characters with the most significant changes as a result of this choice made in the scriptwriting process, Morgana and Perceval.

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<sup>23</sup> Mate, V. J. L. M. “Transmutation in John Boorman’s *Excalibur*: Accuracy and Intersemiotic Translation in the Movie Adaptation of *Le Morte d’Arthur*.” *ONOMÁZEIN*, vol. 62, no. 1, 2023, pp. 187–208.

<sup>24</sup> Jeffrey, Scott. “4 Powerful Masculine Archetypes: King Warrior Magician Lover.” *Scott Jeffrey*, 28 Dec. 2024, <https://scottjeffrey.com/king-warrior-magician-lover-masculine-archetypes/>.

<sup>25</sup> Kennedy, Harlan. “EXCALIBUR: John Boorman – in Interview.” *American Cinema Papers*, 1981, [americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm](http://americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm)



Morgana, played by Helen Mirren in the film, is the half-sister of King Arthur, who through her cunning and ambition, attempts to destroy Arthur and the Kingdom of Camelot. As a character in *Excalibur*, she is a beautiful woman and a speaker of magic, a formidable opponent.

However, in Arthurian literature, there is no singular character of the witch Morgana. Instead, she is all “the female banes of Arthur and Merlin Morgause, Nenyve, and Morgan le Fay-whom we read of in *Le Morte d'Arthur*, become one figure.”<sup>26</sup> While this reduced the number of characters Boorman had to contend with, it also meant that he could pick the best traits of each character to make one worthy of becoming King Arthur’s foe. Helen Fulton echoes this when she said, “By eliding three of Malory’s female characters... to make Morgana, Boorman is able to create a character who is driven by the desire for revenge on the son for Uther’s rape of her mother.”<sup>27</sup> By using this method, he has created a character that helps to shape as well as propel the story.

The same method is applied to the character of Perceval in *Excalibur*. Although Perceval is a latecomer to the Knights of the Round Table, his importance to the story rapidly increases and he becomes the last character the audience sees at the end of the film. Unlike the character of Morgana, who is made up of an

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<sup>26</sup> Aberth, John. *A Knight at the Movies: Medieval History on Film*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2003. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1039230>.

<sup>27</sup> Fulton, Helen, editor. *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*. John Wiley & Sons, 2009. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4026444>.

amalgamation of traits from other characters in *Le Morte d'Arthur*, the character of Perceval is shaped by a variety of story arcs of multiple characters. As Fulton summarises:

*“Boorman’s Perceval is pieced together from the adventures of other characters in Malory. He is Malory’s Gareth, put to work in the kitchens by Sir Kay because his noble origins are unknown. He is Sir Bors, offering to fight for Guinevere in case Sir Lancelot does not appear in the lists. He is the Perceval of Chrétien’s continuators. Finally, he is Sir Bedevere, unwillingly throwing Arthur’s sword back in to the lake as his lord lies dying.”*<sup>28</sup>

Instead settling for many characters of little importance to the plot of *Excalibur*, Boorman was able to create a singular character who plays an integral role in the film. This is especially evident in Arthur’s quest for the Holy Grail when “Boorman transfers the focus of the Quest from Galahad, Lancelot’s son, who is omitted entirely from the film, to Perceval.”<sup>29</sup> Boorman and Pallenberg use this almost Frankenstein-like method to create characters that serve a specific purpose to the plot.

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<sup>28</sup> Fulton, Helen, editor. *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*. John Wiley & Sons, 2009.

ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4026444>.

<sup>29</sup> Aberth, John. *A Knight at the Movies: Medieval History on Film*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2003. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1039230>.

When writing the script, Boorman admits that “I wrote the original script myself, but at some point, I got stuck on it. It was a bit too long and convoluted. So, I got Rospo in.”<sup>30</sup> The idea of writing a script based on a legend in its entirety without collaboration seems almost impossible. In doing so, Boorman was able to write a script that closely resembled *Le Morte d’Arthur* in its entirety.

Had he not enlisted the help of longtime collaborator Rospo Pallenberg, he might have ended up with a four-hour script or been forced to adapt only part of the Arthurian cycle. However, according to Boorman, Pallenberg came up with “two extremely brilliant ideas.”<sup>31</sup> The first linked directly to the sword Excalibur and how it became the sword in the stone, and the second involved the use of time jumps to propel the story.

The first twenty-three minutes of *Excalibur* serves the same function as a prologue that presents a lot of information to the audience. This includes introducing Merlin and his magical capabilities, depicts the conception and birth of King Arthur, and also introduces a land ravaged by war from which the foundations of King Arthur’s Camelot will be built upon. However, it also depicts one of the key differences between *Le Morte d’Arthur* and the *Excalibur*. The origin of the sword Excalibur as the sword in the stone.

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<sup>30</sup> Kennedy, Harlan. “EXCALIBUR: John Boorman – in Interview.” *American Cinema Papers*, 1981, [americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm](http://americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm).

<sup>31</sup> Kennedy, Harlan. “EXCALIBUR: John Boorman – in Interview.” *American Cinema Papers*, 1981, [americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm](http://americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm).

In Malory's work, Merlin is the one to drive Excalibur into the stone but by having "Uther Pendragon plunge Excalibur into the stone to prevent it falling into the hands of his enemies,"<sup>32</sup> Boorman makes Uther, in his words, "the 'primogenitor'"<sup>33</sup> of the whole saga." This change in script proves Fulton's point that "nothing in *Excalibur* 'just happens.'"<sup>34</sup> It sets the stage for the narrative to propel itself forward.

In addition, it overlaps with Pallenberg's second major contribution to the script, the use of jumps in time. Right after Uther's death, the audience is thrust eighteen years into the future to the pivotal moment when Arthur draws Excalibur from the stone. Another example of this is used when depicting the growth of Mordred, Arthur's son. Introduced as a young boy, in the span of ten seconds, he is reintroduced to the audience as a young man. By prioritising the defining moments of the Arthurian legend, Boorman and Pallenberg have written a script with a higher likelihood of being picked up by a production company.

Overall, the influence of contemporary narrative techniques such as Jungian archetypes yet abandoning those such as the contemporary Hero's Journey makes *Excalibur* a very unique script. Through Boorman and Pallenberg's efforts, they were able to retain the essence of Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Even though there were many changes such as amalgamations of characters as well as dislocations of

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<sup>32</sup> Boorman, J. *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*. (2004). Farrar Straus and Giroux.

<sup>33</sup> Kennedy, Harlan. "EXCALIBUR: John Boorman – in Interview." *American Cinema Papers*, 1981, [americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm](http://americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm).

<sup>34</sup> Fulton, Helen, editor. *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*. John Wiley & Sons, 2009. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4026444>.

story, it meant they were able to create something that could be accessible for modern audiences. In some cases, they even created characters that surpassed those that came before them as Brian Hoyle echoes when describing Morgana as “an altogether more formidable creation than her predecessors.”<sup>35</sup>

The script of *Excalibur* had been curated as a foundation in which the production could be built upon. The script also helped to accentuate Boorman’s capabilities as a visual storyteller in the ways in which he portrays jumps in time which will be explored in the next chapter. To conclude this chapter, Boorman and Pallenberg created a world “where hundreds of years of genius and junk can be brought together in the service of a fantasy that is simultaneously bound by the past that has produced it and also capable of resisting the limitations of history.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Hoyle, Brian. *The Cinema of John Boorman*. Scarecrow Press, 2012. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1042018>.

<sup>36</sup> Fulton, Helen, editor. *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*. John Wiley & Sons, 2009. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4026444>.

*Chapter 2:*

*INTERPRETATION: THE MAKING*

Having written the script of *Excalibur*, Boorman now was faced with the task of visualising the legend of King Arthur in a way that met the demands of the audience yet also attempted to succeed them. In retelling the full Arthurian cycle, the film demanded careful attention to detail when curating a new and detailed interpretation of life in the time of wizards and kings while ensuring that it remained relatable to a modern audience. Lorraine Stock also points out that, “A more selfish (and realistic) motive might be the desire to differentiate themselves from previous filmmakers' innovations and to impose their personal vision upon Arthur ‘s narrative.”<sup>37</sup>

Boorman is a renowned visual director, as verified by Helen Fulton in noting that “The power of Boorman’s work lies in his visual artistry.”<sup>38</sup> Reputation notwithstanding, this would be Boorman’s most ambitious project to date. He would utilise everything such as the setting of the forest to spotlight underlying themes of the script. In addition, Boorman along with his director of photography, Alex Thomson, would use specific lighting and camera techniques to transport his audience into the world of myth. Finally, the director and his creative team would embrace the inaccuracy of costume and production design to pertain to the preconceptions of Arthurian legend.

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<sup>37</sup> Stock, L. K. "Reinventing an Iconic Arthurian Moment: The Sword in the Stone in Films and Television." *Arthuriana*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2015, pp. 66–83. [JSTOR](#).

<sup>38</sup> Fulton, Helen, editor. *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*. John Wiley & Sons, 2009. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4026444>.

When describing the work of directors attempting to adapt the Arthurian myth, John Aberth says that “filmmakers have given free rein to their own imaginations about Arthur, bringing with that creativity both the rewards and risks it inspires.”<sup>39</sup> What Boorman understood from the beginning was that his job was to recreate a mythical legend, and he avoided the trap of equating said legend to history based on the age of the primary source he was adapting.

An audience thinks they want a film that is accurate to the primary source. However, what they truly desire is an accuracy to the idea that the primary source surrounds itself with. Boorman himself states his intentions in saying, “What I’m doing is setting it in a world, a period, of the imagination”<sup>40</sup> and later stating that, “the date is the least important thing really. I think of the story, the his-tory, as a myth. The film has to do with mythical truth.”<sup>41</sup> With this understanding ingrained into his approach to filming of *Excalibur*, it is obvious as to why he made certain choices in regard to the visual conception of the film.

The physical setting of *Excalibur* is one that Boorman had been familiar with for a large portion of his life. Even when writing his *Lord of the Rings* adaptation he was completely enthralled by the Wicklow mountains, stating “The valley in the Wicklow hills outside of Dublin where my house sits is as close to Middle-Earth as

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<sup>39</sup> Aberth, John. *A Knight at the Movies: Medieval History on Film*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2003. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1039230>.

<sup>40</sup> Kennedy, Harlan. “EXCALIBUR: John Boorman – in Interview.” *American Cinema Papers*, 1981, [americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm](http://americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm).

<sup>41</sup> Kennedy, Harlan. “EXCALIBUR: John Boorman – in Interview.” *American Cinema Papers*, 1981, [americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm](http://americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm).



you can get in this depleted world.”<sup>42</sup> This inspiration would carry on through to the production of *Excalibur* as much of the film was shot in those very same mountains. However, it wasn’t simply out of personal bias that Boorman would select this location but also because of the direct ties to the thematic weight of the film. As Adam Nayman interprets, “The landscape in *Excalibur* feels almost impossibly fertile, which fits Boorman’s conception of Arthur’s rise, fall, and redemption as a kind of national creation myth.”<sup>43</sup>

The theme of Nature is very prevalent in *Excalibur* in relation to the characters of the film and the impact that their choices make on the world around them. Tim Pelan explains part of the story of *Excalibur* by saying that, “The characters are all struggling to find their place in the world, to maintain harmony with nature.”<sup>44</sup> Essentially, it is where most of the conflict of the story derives from.

However, it would be possible to assume that one wouldn’t be aware of that fact from the script alone, but only with the addition of the forest in the visualisations of the film. What’s more, the setting is key in helping fulfil Boorman’s hope of applying a ‘Celticism’ to the film since “a healthy association with nature is linked,

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<sup>42</sup> Boorman, John. *Money into Light: The Emerald Forest, a Diary*. Faber & Faber, 1985.

<sup>43</sup> Nayman, Adam. “‘Excalibur’ Is the Only Good King Arthur Movie.” *The Ringer*, 12 May 2017, [www.theringer.com/2017/05/12/pop-culture/excalibur-king-arthur-movie-adaptations-55732956b7f8](http://www.theringer.com/2017/05/12/pop-culture/excalibur-king-arthur-movie-adaptations-55732956b7f8).

<sup>44</sup> Pelan, Tim. “‘The Past, Present and Future of Humanity’: John Boorman’s *Excalibur*.” *Cinephilia & Beyond*, 16 Dec. 2024, [cinephiliabeyond.org](http://cinephiliabeyond.org).

in Boorman's vision, with paganism, and the Grail quest in his version of the story.”<sup>45</sup>

The forest and its colour are a token symbol of Celtic roots as Boorman explains, “The forest is so important to this myth and to all British myths, really... what interested me particularly is really the way in which this legend is about the coming of Christianity and the passing of the old gods.” The film is set in a transitional period, the transition from forest to man-made fortresses, from pagan beliefs to Christian ones. Thematically it is similar to the changes in the season, like the trees losing their leaves. As Stephen Price explains, “It is set on the cusp of when the old ways, magic, nature-based belief systems, druids et cetera, were receding, when Christianity became dominant, and mankind becomes ever more reliant on technology.”<sup>46</sup>

Another example that shows Nature as an important theme of *Excalibur* is Morgana’s death as “Morgana’s use of magic to defy the natural process of ageing, and the way this brings about her demise.”<sup>47</sup> Even by the end of *Excalibur*, this transitionary period from nature to mechanism is not over, so by going against the very land from which she receives her powers, Morgana unknowingly signs her

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<sup>45</sup> Davidson, Roberta. “The ‘Reel’ Arthur: Politics and Truth Claims in *Camelot*, *Excalibur*, and *King Arthur*.” *Arthuriana*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2007, pp. 62–84. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27870837>.

<sup>46</sup> Boorman, John, director. *Excalibur*. Director’s commentary, Warner Bros., 1981.

<sup>47</sup> “Excalibur – John Boorman’s Creation of an Otherworldly Arthurian Dream: Wanderings 1/26.” *A Year in the Country*, 1 Dec. 2020, <https://ayearinthecountry.co.uk/excalibur-john-boormans-creation-of-an-otherworldly-arthurian-dream-wanderings-1-26/>.

own death wish. This idea that nature is the supplier of the magic seen in *Excalibur* is echoed by Helen Fulton who says, “The film is dominated by lush, green landscapes, offering a loose connection with the Celtic association of supernatural, divine powers with natural phenomena such as rocks, streams, and lakes.”<sup>48</sup> In more practical terms, Boorman made sure to utilise the forest in as many ways as possible.

In addition to the thematic weight the forest had, it also became a tool for visual storytelling that Boorman could utilise. When speaking earlier of the use of jumps in time to denote importance to the events of *Excalibur*, Boorman felt that visual storytelling was the only way in which they could be accentuated. In the script, when Uther dies after plunging Excalibur into a stone there is a jump of eighteen years where the audience finally meets Arthur and witnesses the iconic event that proves Arthur’s right to the throne. This time jump occurs in the same place in the forest, so in order to visualise the passing of time Boorman explains, “I shot the first in Winter; then I shot it again in Spring, when all the trees were in leaf... That’s a passage of eighteen years in one cut, and it gave the story enormous dynamic power.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Fulton, Helen, editor. *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*. John Wiley & Sons, 2009. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4026444>.

<sup>49</sup> Kennedy, Harlan. “EXCALIBUR: John Boorman – in Interview.” *American Cinema Papers*, 1981, [americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm](http://americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm).

This also highlights the success of the cinematography in the film as Boorman's director of photography, Alex Thompson, was nominated for an academy award for his work on *Excalibur*. In lighting the forest, Boorman wanted to take a different approach as he explains, "I told my cameraman, Alex Thompson, not to consider them as exteriors. I wanted to light them as though we were inside a building."<sup>50</sup> This almost gave the impression that the forest was treated as a second home for the characters to inhabit, which coincided with the theme of the characters finding their place in nature.

Another visual indicator that unified the people and the land were the green gels used throughout the films as Boorman explains "We shone emerald light at the oaks and on to the swords and armour, to enhance the mystical sense of the forest as a palpable living thing."<sup>51</sup> The use of the green gels united the themes of living nature as well as mysticism. The lighting was paramount to visually conveying these convergences as Brian Hoyle echoes "Alex Thomson, backlight *Excalibur* with a green light and bounce it off the knight's armour, giving an early indication of the relationship between the fate of the king and that of the land."<sup>52</sup> Boorman's utilisation of the forest in the film as well as Thompson's expertise in camera and

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<sup>50</sup> Kennedy, Harlan. "EXCALIBUR: John Boorman – in Interview." *American Cinema Papers*, 1981, [americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm](http://americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm).

<sup>51</sup> Boorman, J. *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*. (2004). Farrar Straus and Giroux.

<sup>52</sup> Hoyle, Brian. *The Cinema of John Boorman*. Scarecrow Press, 2012. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1042018>.

lighting shows the land of *Excalibur* “...as if it takes place in no particular time in history. Like it’s another planet.”<sup>53</sup>

Another aspect of *Excalibur* that added to its geographical and historical ambiguity is the use of costume and production design. There was a delicate balance that needed to be met as iterated by Norris Lacy, “At best, they dramatize a Middle Ages “reinvented” during the nineteenth century; at worst, they themselves simply reinvent.”<sup>54</sup> While Boorman wanted to reimagine the myth of King Arthur, it had to be in touch with what the audience associated that era of legend with. The way in which this was achieved was through visual anachronisms. As Vincent Canby of the New York Times noted, “Quite appropriately, the sets and costumes are not easily identified with any known era.”<sup>55</sup>

The legend of King Arthur is said to have been set in the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century; however, when people imagine Arthur with his knights of the round table, they often picture the glistening silver of their armour. This iconic imagery is more suited to the Middle Ages, specifically the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century. This shows the importance of costume in films that navigate the restrictions of modernity to represent Arthurian

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<sup>53</sup> Abele, Robert. “All the King’s Men - Zack Snyder.” *DGA*, Summer 2010, [www.dga.org/Craft/DGAQ/All-Articles/1002-Summer-2010/Screening-Room-Zack-Snyder.aspx](http://www.dga.org/Craft/DGAQ/All-Articles/1002-Summer-2010/Screening-Room-Zack-Snyder.aspx).

<sup>54</sup> Lacy, N. (1989). Arthurian film and the tyranny of tradition. *Arthurian Interpretations*, 4(1), 75–85.

<sup>55</sup> Canby, Vincent. *Boorman’s Excalibur*. (1981, April 10). *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/04/10/movies/boorman-s-excalibur.html>

legend. In addition, the costumes worn by Morgana and Guinevere are entirely fantastical compared to the actual attire worn by women in the 5th or 6th centuries, or even during the Middle Ages. However, historical accuracy was not a concern. The care in the costume design was taken in visually representing these characters through their clothing, not in worrying itself with historical accuracy.

In relation to the production design of Camelot, the primary source offered very little when describing Camelot for Boorman and his creative team. As V. J. L. Mate explains, “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.”<sup>56</sup> Boorman didn’t commission a set build reminiscent to surviving castle structures but instead approached it with a more enigmatic view. As Boorman himself explains, “I’m avoiding using any existing castles or other architectural modes. I’m trying to take it as far from an identifiable reality as possible. We’re building everything ourselves...”<sup>57</sup>

The result of this approach was a castle that completely satisfies the audiences’ preconceptions yet is totally unique in regard to historically accurate architecture. Returning to the influence of J.R.R. Tolkien’s work, the great hall that shelters King Arthur’s round table is interchangeable with something you’d

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<sup>56</sup> Mate, V. J. L. M. “Transmutation in John Boorman’s *Excalibur*: Accuracy and Intersemiotic Translation in the Movie Adaptation of *Le Morte d’Arthur*.” *ONOMÁZEIN*, vol. 62, no. 1, 2023, pp. 187–208.

<sup>57</sup> Boorman, John. *Money into Light: The Emerald Forest, a Diary*. Faber & Faber, 1985.

see in the elven realm of Rivendell. As Leah Haught observes in relation to *Excalibur* is that “the resulting temporal ambiguity produces a sense of timelessness not only because it remains difficult to place... but also because almost all iterations of the legend evoke this slippage between past and present.”<sup>58</sup>

Overall, by exploring the importance of setting as well as investigating the choices made in the art direction of *Excalibur*, it is obvious that Boorman and his creative team were motivated by the existing preconceptions of the legends of King Arthur. They also show Boorman’s own influences of the forest as well as Tolkien’s work. In addition, the use of camera to accentuate the written details of the script proves Brian Hoyle’s observation that “Boorman dispenses with these written explanations and conveys the information visually.”<sup>59</sup> The artistic lens of *Excalibur* proves that Boorman’s efforts to recreate a legend in juxtaposition with history was paramount to the film’s visual success. The world of *Excalibur* is a unique creation, one that had never been seen before and one that is unlikely to be seen again.

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<sup>58</sup> Haught, Leah. "Performing Nostalgia: Medievalism in *King Arthur* and *Camelot*." *Arthuriana*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2014, pp. 97–126.

<sup>59</sup> Hoyle, Brian. *The Cinema of John Boorman*. Scarecrow Press, 2012. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1042018>.

*Chapter 3:*  
*BECOMING LEGEND*



Having spent years working on *Excalibur*, had Boorman done enough to reimagine Arthurian legend? To some, maybe. When the film was released in the United States on the 10th of April 1981, it was met with a mixed reception. While some applauded the film as a feat of true filmmaking, marvelling at its visuals, others thought that the story was lacking, and because it did not strictly adhere to typical contemporary script structure that it made it difficult for the audiences to appreciate anything that was on screen.

The extensive disparity between each review begs the question, was adapting a legend in its entirety even within the realm of possibility in the modern world of filmmaking? Boorman describes the process of writing the script with Pallenberg, “We both felt that we were not inventing, but rather rediscovering lost fragments of the story, uncovering hidden truth.”<sup>60</sup> What is interesting is how these reviews have developed over the past 40 years since the film's release.

One would argue that Boorman never wanted *Excalibur* to replace *Le Morte d'Arthur*. He wanted to use the medium of film to allow for a wider audience to be part of the world of Arthurian legend. However, even with this more humble approach to the film, there were those who rejected *Excalibur* in its attempts to expand Arthurian myth to modern audiences. Famously, the first line of Roger Ebert's review of *Excalibur* was, “What a wondrous vision “*Excalibur*” is! And

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<sup>60</sup> Boorman, J. *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*. (2004). Farrar Straus and Giroux.

what a mess.”<sup>61</sup> This would give a clear indication as to the content of the rest of the review.

While Roger Ebert acknowledged the visual journey of *Excalibur* he also confessed that “... all of this is buried in such a wealth of detail, such an impenetrable atmosphere, such tumultuous alarms and excursions, that the audience is quite likely to lose its place.”<sup>62</sup> This is also subconsciously highlighted by Helen Fulton who says that “In *Excalibur*, the supernatural, the magic, and the prophetic overwhelm the chivalric element of Malory’s text.”<sup>63</sup>

As Eberts review continues, it is obvious that he also had an issue with the structure of the story in *Excalibur*. He writes, “The people in this film seem doomed to their behaviour. They have no choice.”<sup>64</sup> Ebert cites that the flaws in the main characters of *Excalibur* were just contradictions to their already established character traits. He makes an example of Lancelot, who fought in Guinevere’s honour, only to sleep with her not long after. Ebert makes a special example of Merlin, who he acknowledges as one of the most powerful characters of the film but describes how, “he seems to decide from moment to moment whether to possess vast powers or

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<sup>61</sup> Ebert, Roger. "Excalibur Movie Review & Film Summary (1981)." *Roger Ebert*, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/excalibur-1981>.

<sup>62</sup> Ebert, Roger. "Excalibur Movie Review & Film Summary (1981)." *Roger Ebert*, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/excalibur-1981>.

<sup>63</sup> Fulton, Helen, editor. *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*. John Wiley & Sons, 2009. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4026444>.

<sup>64</sup>Ebert, Roger. "Excalibur Movie Review & Film Summary (1981)." *Roger Ebert*, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/excalibur-1981>.

none.” This evaluation seems to be in complete contrast with Boorman’s vision for *Excalibur*.<sup>65</sup>

When talking about his approach to directing the cast of the film he said, “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.”<sup>66</sup> However, an explanation for Boorman’s satisfaction with the script and Ebert’s dissatisfaction is offered by Michel Ciment who explains that because *Excalibur*, “...reinvents a mythical past in which a bewildering variety of styles and periods together conspire to revive the Arthurian cycle...his primary concern has been to escape the categorical imperative of plot.”<sup>67</sup>

Another critic, Pauline Kael, was quick to point out the various elements of *Excalibur* that she found lacking. As predicted, due to the sheer amount of storytelling Boorman was trying to put together in such a short amount of time, Kael wrote, “The film is almost all action, with very little at stake for us, because we hardly have a chance to meet the characters before they’re off and running.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ebert, Roger. "Excalibur Movie Review & Film Summary (1981)." *Roger Ebert*, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/excalibur-1981>.

<sup>66</sup> Kennedy, Harlan. “EXCALIBUR: John Boorman – in Interview.” *American Cinema Papers*, 1981, [americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm](http://americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm).

<sup>67</sup> Ciment, Michel. *John Boorman*. Faber and Faber, 1986.

<sup>68</sup> Kael, Pauline. "Excalibur (1981) – Review by Pauline Kael: Boorman’s Plunge." *Scraps from the Loft*, 27 Dec. 2017, <https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/movies/excalibur-boormans-plunge-review-by-pauline-kael/>.

Even Boorman was aware of this issue as he himself stated that, “I was determined to tell the whole span of the story although I was aware that it made better sense to tell some portion of it.”<sup>69</sup>

Another issue that Kael experienced with *Excalibur* was the dialogue stating that, in her opinion, “The dialogue in *Excalibur* is near atrocious; written by Rospo Pallenberg and Boorman, it reveals what Boorman thinks he’s doing.”<sup>70</sup> The reason for the harshness in tone, she explains, is the lack of subtlety. The visuals are as optical as they can possibly be, the script pushes the run time to its absolute limit, and on top of that, the dialogue is used to extend everything that is already there. “Boorman is telling the Arthurian legends straight, all right—as straight as he can ever do anything.”<sup>71</sup>

However, this criticism of *Excalibur*’s dialogue isn’t widespread as some felt that the dialogue helped translate the universal morality of the script, as V. J. L. Mate states, “The dialogue created by the director grants the characters with a greater depth and face them to moral dilemmas proper both of the Middle Ages and

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<sup>69</sup> Boorman. J. *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*. (2004). Farrar Straus and Giroux.

<sup>70</sup> Kael, Pauline. "Excalibur (1981) – Review by Pauline Kael: Boorman’s Plunge." *Scraps from the Loft*, 27 Dec. 2017, <https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/movies/excalibur-boormans-plunge-review-by-pauline-kael/>.

<sup>71</sup> Kael, Pauline. "Excalibur (1981) – Review by Pauline Kael: Boorman’s Plunge." *Scraps from the Loft*, 27 Dec. 2017, <https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/movies/excalibur-boormans-plunge-review-by-pauline-kael/>.

nowadays.”<sup>72</sup> Of course, not all reviews from *Excalibur*’s release in the 1980’s were as negative. There were a few reviews similar to Variety Magazine who stated that, “*Excalibur* is exquisite, a near-perfect blend of action, romance, fantasy and philosophy, finely acted and beautifully filmed by director John Boorman and cinematographer Alex Thomson.”<sup>73</sup>

However, the more recent reviews of the film have unveiled an interesting shift in audience reception. Modern reviews reveal that there has been a growing appreciation for *Excalibur* since its release in 1981. Adam Nayman’s 2017 review described how, “*Excalibur* isn’t for everybody, but for kids who grew up... wondering what all that magic might actually look like, it’s the stuff that dreams are made of.”<sup>74</sup> This seems to speak to the visuals of the film, especially the use of green gels throughout the film which “gave it a luminous, dream-like quality, especially any time the magical blade Excalibur is drawn”<sup>75</sup>

In 2019, Jim Knipfel commented on the structure of *Excalibur* saying that, “I think what really makes the film stand out is that at heart it’s structured... as a history of

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<sup>72</sup> Mate, V. J. L. M. “Transmutation in John Boorman’s *Excalibur*: Accuracy and Intersemiotic Translation in the Movie Adaptation of *Le Morte d’Arthur*.” *ONOMÁZEIN*, vol. 62, no. 1, 2023, pp. 187–208.

<sup>73</sup> “Excalibur.” *Variety*, 31 Dec. 1980, <https://variety.com/1980/film/reviews/excalibur-1200424996/>.

<sup>74</sup> Nayman, Adam. “‘Excalibur’ Is the Only Good King Arthur Movie.” *The Ringer*, 12 May 2017, [www.theringer.com/2017/05/12/pop-culture/excalibur-king-arthur-movie-adaptations-55732956b7f8](http://www.theringer.com/2017/05/12/pop-culture/excalibur-king-arthur-movie-adaptations-55732956b7f8).

<sup>75</sup> Pelan, Tim. “‘The Past, Present and Future of Humanity’: John Boorman’s *Excalibur*.” *Cinephilia & Beyond*, 16 Dec. 2024, [cinephiliabeyond.org](http://cinephiliabeyond.org).

mankind's past, present, and future, albeit set exclusively in the Middle Ages.”<sup>76</sup> This seems to express an appreciation for the unique story structure that Boorman and Pallenberg had to create to tell the full story of King Arthur; in doing so they also used the structure as a double-edged sword to explore the film as a metaphor for humanity in the face of Christianity.

Roberta Davidson echoes this, “What interested me particularly is really the way in which this legend is about the coming of Christianity and the passing of the old gods and so the Merlin represents the magic of the past.”<sup>77</sup> In addition, when talking about the narrative content of *Excalibur* in 2014, William I. Lengeman wrote how, “None of which seems terribly impressive in a printed synopsis, but Boorman and his crew bring things to life in a very impressive manner...”<sup>78</sup> It is obvious that the visuals of *Excalibur* truly outweigh the story for modern audiences. Lengeman

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<sup>76</sup> Knipfel, Jim. “John Boorman’s *Excalibur* Isn’t Just Another King Arthur Movie.” *Den of Geek*, 10 Oct. 2023, [www.denofgeek.com/movies/john-boormans-excalibur-isnt-just-another-king-arthur-movie/](http://www.denofgeek.com/movies/john-boormans-excalibur-isnt-just-another-king-arthur-movie/).

<sup>77</sup> Davidson, Roberta. “The ‘Reel’ Arthur: Politics and Truth Claims in *Camelot*, *Excalibur*, and *King Arthur*.” *Arthuriana*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2007, pp. 62–84. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27870837>.

<sup>78</sup> Lengeman, William I. “One Arthurian Film to Rule Them All: John Boorman’s *Excalibur*.” *Black Gate*, 27 Feb. 2014, [www.blackgate.com/2014/02/27/one-arthurian-film-to-rule-them-all-john-boormans-excalibur/](http://www.blackgate.com/2014/02/27/one-arthurian-film-to-rule-them-all-john-boormans-excalibur/).

continues his applause, "While not a perfect piece of cinema, I fail to see how it could be improved on very much."<sup>79</sup>

What makes these positive reviews of *Excalibur* interesting is how the audience has changed since the film's release. Lengmean also wrote how he was "surprised to find... that there were a number of high-profile reviewers back in the day who were decidedly less than impressed with it."<sup>80</sup> What all these reviewers have in common is the time in their lives when *Excalibur* was released. As children, these reviewers were introduced to the world of Arthurian legend through the media of film, with strong visuals that captured their attention and earned the right to hold it.

Bruce. A. Beatie echoes the sentiment, "He accomplished this reinterpretation more through the film's imagery than in its events."<sup>81</sup> What is more impressive is how the film seems to have grown with this younger audience. Frank. H. Wu

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<sup>79</sup> Lengeman, William I. "One Arthurian Film to Rule Them All: John Boorman's *Excalibur*." *Black Gate*, 27 Feb. 2014, [www.blackgate.com/2014/02/27/one-arthurian-film-to-rule-them-all-john-boormans-excalibur/](http://www.blackgate.com/2014/02/27/one-arthurian-film-to-rule-them-all-john-boormans-excalibur/).

<sup>80</sup> Lengeman, William I. "One Arthurian Film to Rule Them All: John Boorman's *Excalibur*." *Black Gate*, 27 Feb. 2014, [www.blackgate.com/2014/02/27/one-arthurian-film-to-rule-them-all-john-boormans-excalibur/](http://www.blackgate.com/2014/02/27/one-arthurian-film-to-rule-them-all-john-boormans-excalibur/).

<sup>81</sup> Beatie, Bruce A. "Arthurian Films and Arthurian Texts: Problems of Reception and Comprehension." *Arthurian Interpretations*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1988, pp. 65–78. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27868641>.

wrote, “Yet, when I behold *Excalibur* now, it still seems fresh and grand.”<sup>82</sup> For many, the film has surpassed the restrictions of time itself to present a timeless world. While Boorman didn’t receive applause initially, it is obvious that as the years have passed, *Excalibur* has morphed into its own legendary status.

The beauty of Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* is the timelessness it exudes in a similar way to the Arthurian legend itself. With all this in mind, Boorman still called Malory “the first hack writer.”<sup>83</sup> However, by basing *Excalibur* from Malory’s work, he also acknowledged the work as a primary source to the legend. Although *Le Morte d’Arthur* was written in 1470 and is set in the 5th to 6th century, it met somewhere between those centuries and often found itself resonating with the 12th century. Boorman explains, “so these tales set by Malory in the twelfth century described events which had happened much earlier.”<sup>84</sup>

This amalgamation of eras made for a nostalgic piece of work which was a defining reason as to why *Le Morte d’Arthur* was so successful. As John Aberth explains how it, “...appealed to a wistful nostalgia many of its readers must have felt for an earlier, more innocent time, when there was a more clarified sense of

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<sup>82</sup> Wu, Frank H. “Excalibur: Is This the Best King Arthur Movie?” *Film Inquiry*, 30 Nov. 2018, [www.filminquiry.com/excalibur-best-king-arthur/](http://www.filminquiry.com/excalibur-best-king-arthur/).

<sup>83</sup> Kennedy, Harlan. “EXCALIBUR: John Boorman – in Interview.” *American Cinema Papers*, 1981, [americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm](http://americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm).

<sup>84</sup> Kennedy, Harlan. “EXCALIBUR: John Boorman – in Interview.” *American Cinema Papers*, 1981, [americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm](http://americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm).



right and wrong.”<sup>85</sup> Nostalgia fuels legend, so of course, it is a common characteristic in adaptations of legend. Tison Pugh describes, “a sense of nostalgia for a lost past percolates throughout many medievalist endeavours, in that the turn to history often reveals a sense of discontentment with the present.”<sup>86</sup>

This could be the answer as to why there were so many mixed reviews in the eighties at the release of *Excalibur*. To the audience of the time, *Excalibur* could never achieve what *Le Morte d'Arthur* did for Arthurian legend due to the medium in which the myth was recreated. As Aberth puts it, “What made Malory's work so influential is that it found great favour not only with his contemporaries but with posterity as well.”<sup>87</sup> However, as the years passed and the grip of nostalgia started to take hold, *Excalibur* began to achieve the same timeless nature as *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

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<sup>85</sup> Aberth, John. *A Knight at the Movies: Medieval History on Film*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2003. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1039230>.

<sup>86</sup> Pugh, Tison, and Angela Weisl. *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2012. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1074983>.

<sup>87</sup> Aberth, John. *A Knight at the Movies: Medieval History on Film*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2003. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1039230>.

Overall, an examination of the reviews of *Excalibur* has uncovered an interesting trend in relation to the film's place in Arthurian Legend. At its initial release, the film's modernity was its greatest enemy. However, as the years have passed, nostalgia has allowed the film to find its place within the mythic tradition, drawing parallels with the timeless appeal of legend.

*Chapter 4:*

*HERO: KING ARTHUR*

According to Imelda Whelan, “any critical consideration of an adaptation's reception might benefit from recognizing some of the practical realities involved in producing a commercially successful film.”<sup>88</sup> Most of these 'practical realities' we have already explored previously. The necessary time jumps needed in the script, the amalgamation of characters and the anachronistic art design of the film all contributed to transforming myth into a two and a half hour viewing experience. Of course, and much to Boorman's displeasure, it is still only an adaptation, as Dudley Andrew points out, “A standard whole can only be a text. A version of it is an adaptation in a narrow sense.”<sup>89</sup>

However, the dichotomy between film and literature is one that shows that there is much more to be explored in visual adaptations. This is explained thoroughly by Frank D. McConnell who wrote, “In written narrative, we begin with the consciousness of the hero and have to construct out of that consciousness the social and physical world the hero inhabits.”<sup>90</sup>

This is also true regarding Arthurian legend as an ample amount of the discourse surrounding the legend in modern times has been to do with whether King Arthur and his kingdom of Camelot ever existed. Books such as *King Arthur: The Making of Legend*<sup>91</sup> by Nicholas. J. Higham explores the origin of King Arthur

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<sup>88</sup> Cartmell, Deborah, and Imelda Whelan. *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*. Routledge, 1999.

<sup>89</sup> Andrew, Dudley. *Concepts in Film Theory*. Oxford University Press, 1984.

<sup>90</sup> McConnell, Frank. *Storytelling and Mythmaking: Images from Film and Literature*. Oxford University Press, 1982.

<sup>91</sup> Higham, Nicholas J. *King Arthur: The Making of Legend*. Yale University Press, 2018.

and his rise to mythical status. However, McConnell continues, “But in film the situation is essentially and significantly, reversed. Film can show us only objects, only things, only, indeed, people as things. Our activity in watching a filmed narrative is to infer, to construct the selfhood of the hero who might inhabit the objective world film so overwhelmingly gives us.”<sup>92</sup>

In most contemporary cinema, the Hero of the story tends to follow a well guided path that is known as ‘The Hero’s Journey’. Films such as Boorman’s beloved *Lord of the Rings* as well as others such as the first *Star Wars* trilogy use a Hero’s Journey that has been moulded to fit the confines of narrative storytelling in film. However, in *Excalibur*, King Arthur follows a storyline more akin to the monomyth written about by Joseph Campbell in his books such as *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*<sup>93</sup> and *The Power of Myth*.<sup>94</sup> There is a lot of evidence to suggest that Boorman’s characterisation of King Arthur retained the journey of mythical heroes.

As Joseph Campbell explains, “The composite hero of the monomyth is a personage of exceptional gifts. Frequently he is honoured by his society, frequently unrecognized or disdained.”<sup>95</sup> All of these apply to King Arthur.

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<sup>92</sup> McConnell, Frank. *Storytelling and Mythmaking: Images from Film and Literature*. Oxford University Press, 1982.

<sup>93</sup> Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Pantheon Books, 1949.

<sup>94</sup> Campbell, Joseph, and Bill Moyers. *The Power of Myth: With Bill Moyers*. Anchor Books, 1991.

<sup>95</sup> Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Pantheon Books, 1949.

Initially he is unrecognized until he pulls Excalibur from the stone. The act being something that only he is capable of doing as rightful King. In addition, while he is admired by many, he is also hated by others, particularly his half-sister Morgana. In *The Power of Myth*, Campbell points out, “One kind of hero that often appears in Celtic myths... is a type of adventure in which the hero has no idea what he is doing but suddenly finds himself in a transformed realm.”<sup>96</sup> This is also applicable to the extraction of the sword from the stone.

Further connections between Joseph Campbell’s work and King Arthur can be made. As the land’s ruler, Arthur is the source of his kingdom's power. When he is merged with the Fisher King to propel the hunt for the Grail in the film, it is made obvious that Camelot’s disintegration is no mere coincidence. By combining King Arthur with the Fisher King, Boorman and Pallenberg also followed Campbell’s description of a hero as “Grace, food substance, energy: these pour into the living world, and wherever they fail, life decomposes into death.”<sup>97</sup> In addition, as mentioned earlier, if Boorman had made *Excalibur* with the intention of using the modern Hero’s Journey it is likely that the film would have ended at the formation of the round table.

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<sup>96</sup> Campbell, Joseph, and Bill Moyers. *The Power of Myth: With Bill Moyers*. Anchor Books, 1991.

<sup>97</sup> Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Pantheon Books, 1949.

However, the film continues, and, in its continuation, it depicts the death of King Arthur and his kingdom. In the final battle against his son Mordred, Arthur allows himself to be impaled by a spear in order to fatally stab his son, preventing his tyrannous rule. This sacrifice, not for his kingdom as it too will fall with him, but for the greater good is not unlike the hero's sacrifice that Campbell explored when he wrote, "A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself."<sup>98</sup> Even the setting of his death verifies his heroic status as Campbell explains, "The battlefield is symbolic of the field of life, where every creature lives on the death of another."<sup>99</sup> The dialogue only accentuates the power of the scene within this context. "One day a king will come, and the sword will rise again."<sup>100</sup>

In conclusion, the characterisation of King Arthur in John Boorman's *Excalibur* showcases the depth of mythmaking in which the film goes into. According to Campbell, "To bring the images back to life, one has to seek, not interesting applications to modern affairs, but illuminating hints from the inspired past."<sup>101</sup> In retaining the hero of monomyth within *Excalibur*, Boorman created a character that is of a different league to any other rendition of King Arthur.

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<sup>98</sup> Campbell, Joseph, and Bill Moyers. *The Power of Myth: With Bill Moyers*. Anchor Books, 1991.

<sup>99</sup> Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Pantheon Books, 1949.

<sup>100</sup> Boorman, John, director. *Excalibur*. Warner/Orion, 1981.

<sup>101</sup> Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Pantheon Books, 1949.

By adapting the legend of King Arthur into film meant there was an opportunity to explore what it means to be a hero that has survived the unforgiving grasp of time. The unwavering connection between King Arthur in *Excalibur* and Joseph Campbell's work has helped a modern audience understand the psyche of ancient heroism. While Boorman couldn't directly adapt King Arthur from legend, he certainly recreated the King in his predecessor's image. In addition, Joseph Campbell himself understood the limitations of adaptation acknowledging that, "in the innumerable retellings of a traditional story, accidental or intentional dislocations are inevitable."<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Pantheon Books, 1949.



*Conclusion:*  
*ONE TO RULE THEM ALL*

While Boorman didn't exactly receive initial recognition from audiences at the film's release, the film has instead become something more than what he initially strove for as a director. Boorman himself stating, "*Excalibur* may be flawed, it may not be the transcendent movie I had striven for, but its great power derives from the myth it retells."<sup>103</sup> The director's comment has aged significantly as it is obvious that *Excalibur* has followed the footsteps of its literary sources and has become legend itself.

In an interview in 2020, Boorman later contradicts his earlier view that *Excalibur* failed to be the "transcendent movie"<sup>104</sup> he had sought to make. Like *Excalibur*, Boorman has aged, and he reflects on his career, encapsulating it with a very mythological mindset. In a couple lines, not dissimilar to something his Merlin would have said, "So I've seen the span of the trees on the land. A lot of the trees that I planted, I've now outlived. The rest of them will outlive me."<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Boorman, J. *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*. (2004). Farrar Straus and Giroux.

<sup>104</sup> Boorman, J. *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*. (2004). Farrar Straus and Giroux.

<sup>105</sup> Brooks, Xan. "John Boorman: 'You Think the Holy Grail Is Lost? No. I Have It on My Piano.'" *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 13 Feb. 2020, [www.theguardian.com/film/2020/feb/13/john-boorman-you-think-the-holy-grail-is-lost-no-i-have-it-on-my-piano](http://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/feb/13/john-boorman-you-think-the-holy-grail-is-lost-no-i-have-it-on-my-piano).

What makes *Excalibur* all the more impressive is the fact that no one has attempted a similar feat since. Despite the lack of rave reviews from critics, *Excalibur* was nominated at the Academy Awards for Best Cinematography but lost to Vittorio Storaro's work in *Reds*.<sup>106</sup> In addition, *Excalibur* was the recipient of an award entitled 'Best Artistic Contribution' at the Cannes Film Festival. The first of its kind and an award that has only been received twice since, and not since 1988. *Excalibur* is one of the most unique films to have been made and it continues to harbour a growing audience appreciative of the work itself rather than in what it was trying to achieve.

Overall, through these chapters I believe that I have conveyed the vastness of *Excalibur* as a script, as a production and as a focal point of mythological filmmaking. The achievement of creating a script that condenses hundreds of years of legend into a couple of hours is no easy feat and while it is apparent that sacrifices to character and events had to be made, it is clear that Boorman and Pallenberg created a concise retelling of the legend of King Arthur. It is Boorman's achievements in visual storytelling that truly makes the myth come to life. His appreciation of legend gave way to a disinterest in history which helped him curate a subconscious preconception of King Arthur and make it a reality.

Along with the help of Alex Thompson, *Excalibur* will forever be remembered for its otherworldly, mythical imagery that imbued the audience with a sense of nostalgia for a time and place that never existed. For every negative thing said about *Excalibur* there is always a positive to challenge it and it is impossible to contradict

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<sup>106</sup> Beatty, Warren, director. *Reds*. Paramount Pictures, 1982.

the effort that Boorman and his team went to in order to create something that never existed before, and that hasn't existed since. Much like Arthur, this film was created for the future. While it may have been an unknown to Boorman, maybe it was he who wrote Arthur's line, "I was not born to live a man's life, but to be the stuff of future memory."<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Borman, John, director. *Excalibur*. Warner/Orion, 1981.

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