

Popular audio-visual representations of historical subject matter attila the hun



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MatterReport on Representations of Attila the HunIntroductionAttila the Hun was leader of the Hunnic Empire from 434-453 AD. The Empire, a loose confederation of Hunnic tribes, incorporated much of Northern Europe from Germany to the Baltic Sea. Attila waged a series of campaigns for more than twenty years against a weakened Eastern and Western Roman Empire, exacting tribute from both. Attila's invasion of Gaul was finally halted in 451 AD by an alliance of Romans and Visigoth troops at the Battle of the Catalaunian Plains (also known as the Battle of Chalons) in Eastern France. He was dissuaded from attacking Rome in 452 AD by Pope Leo I and died of natural causes in 453 AD.

(Thomson, 1948)Attila is chiefly remembered today for the ferocity and ruthlessness of his campaigns. Called the Scourge of God the Romans, his name inspired fear throughout the Roman Empire and beyond and is still synonymous with slaughter and carnage. Attila's campaigns were chronicled by several Roman writers, notably Priscus, a Roman diplomat, who wrote the only surviving first-hand account of a visit to Attila's encampment, and Jordanes. Ammianus Marcellinus, a 4th Century Roman historian wrote detailed descriptions of the Huns' appearance, culture and military tactics about fifty years before Attila was born. (Thomson, 1948)Attila has become part of European folk-mythology to the extent that Germans were referred to as Huns during the First and Second World Wars. This report examines some popular media representations of Attila

and his achievements from the last fifty years.??? Attila, il flagello di Dio??™ (??? Attila, Scourge of God??™) (1954) ??? This is the legacy of the Hun.

Barbarian hordes sweeping with the force of a tidal wave across the fertile plains of the West. A mighty tide of blood, destruction and death.??™ (Attila, il Flagello di Dio, 1954) proclaims the voiceover narration during the opening credits of ??? Attila??™. The film is a Franco-Italian production starring Anthony Quinn as Attila and Sophia Lauren as the Roman emperor Valentinian III??™'s sister Honoria. The film was produced by Dino de Laurentis and directed by Pietro Francisci.

It was a box-office success, earning over ? 2 million in the ten days following its release, and was one of Lauren??™'s most successful early films. The opening scenes show Roman citizens fleeing before Attila??™'s marauding horsemen. A weeping infant clings to the body of its dead mother in a burning village. There are scenes of murder and pillage. Such scenes would have immediate resonance with French and Italian audiences in 1954 who had experienced invasion and occupation by the German Army.

The film narrative follows known facts about Attila??™'s military career, but Anthony Quinn portrays Attila as an unreflecting brute, who??™'s only motivation is to rape and pillage. There is a sub-plot which casts Honoria as a ??? double agent??™, offering herself in marriage to Attila in order to foil the machinations of her weaker sibling, but the role largely exists for Loren to play a seductress in classic Hollywood mode. The dialogue is melodramatic with phrases such as ??? How I have longed for your lips!??™ (Attila, il Flagello di Dio 1954) from Loren addressed to Quinn, who then proceeds to

slobber over her with a mouth still full of food to emphasise his bestial ways. This portrayal echoes Marcellinus??™ (4th Century) description of Hunnish manners: ??? The nation of the Huns .

. . . surpasses all other Barbarians in wildness of life . . . And though [the Huns] do just bear the likeness of men (of a very ugly pattern), they are so little advanced in civilization that they make no use of fire, nor any kind of relish, in the preparation of their food, but feed upon the roots which they find in the fields, and the half-raw flesh of any sort of animal.??™

(Marcellinus, quoted in Gibbon, 1781)The film delivers an overtly Christian message. The finale of the film places great emphasis on Attila??™s submission to Pope Leo I which is portrayed as the triumph of Christianity over paganism.

Attila??™s meeting with Pope Leo I in 452 and his subsequent decision not to attack Rome itself has been interpreted by Christian historians as evidence of divine intervention to save the Christian Roman Empire. The meeting is portrayed this way in the 14th Century Hungarian illuminated manuscript known as the Chronicon Pictum. (About. com, 2011)Film critic and historian Stuart Galbraith reviewed the film when it was released on DVD in 2008. He observed that: ??? Most of the spectacle is limited to stationary matte paintings??| with very static standard medium shots and close-up cutaways??™ and is ??? filmed almost like an early Italian silent movie??™ .

He concluded that the film is ??? more interesting than good??™. (Galbraith 2008).??? Ancients Behaving Badly??™ (History Channel, 2009) ??? Attila the Hun ??“ they called him the ??? Scourge of God??™ .

He lays waste to everything in his path. He was a thug; he was an extortionist; he was a murderer.??™ (History Channel, 2009). This introduction to the hour-long History Channel documentary on Attila the Hun sets the tone for the rest of the programme. The documentary is part of an eight programme American television series which chronicles the lives of historical characters notorious for their misdeeds, including Attila, Ghengis Khan, and the Emperors Caligula and Nero. The premise of each programme is to identify how ??? evil??™ the subjects were by employing a psychiatrist to analyse the behaviour of each individual, then rating them on a ??? Psychograph??™ – a pseudo-scientific x-y axis scale ranging from ??? goal driven killer??™ to ??? psychopathic murderer??™. The episode featuring Attila was partly filmed on location in Budapest, Istanbul and Rome, and is made up of voice-over narration, historians talking directly to camera and cartoon sequences depicting the events being described.

There are also some brief re-enactments of battle scenes and galloping horsemen, both making extensive use of computer-graphic imagery. The same images of artefacts such as busts, coins and maps depicting the regions discussed are used repeatedly to illustrate the narrative, which indicates that the programme was made on a limited budget. The animated sequences are in the style of Japanese Manga cartoons and typically depict scenes of graphic violence. The action cuts rapidly between cartoons, still images, location shots and historians talking straight to camera. Most scenes in the programme are extremely brief, lasting a maximum of thirty seconds. The musical accompaniment is extremely loud and dramatic, using blaring trumpets and beating drums to highlight key dramatic points in the

narrative. The programme recounts the life of Attila and attempts a scientific forensic examination of evidence from primary sources, making explicit reference to the works of Roman historians Priscus, Marcellinus, and Jordanes. Recent archaeological finds are discussed.

There are also demonstrations of archery and the use of lassoes and nets in combat. The programme attempts to engage a younger audience through its use of contemporary graphic-novel imagery, computer-generated imagery, cartoon animation and live re-enactments of military tactics such as the use of battering-rams. No prior knowledge of the history of the period is assumed and key historical facts are given in a brief and succinct manner in the narrative voiceover and by the historians.

The fast pace and use of live action mean that sustained periods of concentration are not required from the viewer. The language employed by the narrator is informal, using such phrases as '??? Attila??™s rap sheet??™'. Attila??™s exacting of tribute from the Romans is described as '??? a Mafia-style protection racket??™'. Historical figures are compared to contemporary icons such as Mother Theresa and fictional characters from popular culture such as Hannibal Lecter.

Comparisons are drawn between 21st Century terrorist campaigns and Attila??™s use of fear and random violence as a military tactic. (History Channel, 2009) Although broadcast on the History Channel, '??? Ancients Behaving Badly??™' is marketed primarily as sensationalist entertainment, not as a history documentary. At the programme??™s conclusion, Attila is diagnosed by the psychiatrist as being a psychopathic killer. The stated aim

of the programme ??“ an examination of the psychopathology of an historical figure – is essentially lacking in scientific rigour, but the programme, thanks to its extensive use of primary sources and expert opinion, is an academically rigorous empirical examination of historical evidence. ??? Terry Jones Barbarians??™ (BBC, 2006)??? These barbarians would bring the Roman Empire to its??™ knees. With Rome gone, Europe would enter a thousand years of ignorance and chaos ??“ the Dark Ages. At least that??™s what I was told??™ announces Terry Jones at the beginning of ??? The End of the World??™ (Oxford Film and Television Production, 2006) ??? Barbarians??™ is a BBC2 4-part documentary series written and presented by the actor and writer Terry Jones. The series looks at civilisations (such as the Celts, Goths, Vandals) deemed ??? barbarian??™ by the Romans.

The campaigns of Attila are examined in the final programme entitled The End of the World??™. (BBC Press Office, 2006) Jones seeks to overturn the pre-conception that these civilisations were backward and savage. He sets out to prove that the so-called ??? barbarians??™ were simply victims of Rome??™s greatest legacy – Propaganda??™ (Oxford Film and Television Production, 2006) Jones presents his arguments using recent archaeological discoveries as such as skeletons unearthed in Germany which have had their skulls modified by binding in infancy in the Hun style. The finds are put forward as evidence that far from fearing the Huns, these German tribes actively embraced and emulated Hun culture. The documentary is shot on location in Rome and Hungary and does not appear to have had a large budget, or use expensive or sophisticated effects. There is a heavy reliance on in-car shots of Jones driving on location whilst providing a narration.

The language he uses is informal, (??? The most audacious con-trick in history) and jocular, (??? Happy Huns??™) and he actively avoids overly academic or complex vocabulary in a conscious effort to make his work as accessible as possible. (Oxford Film and Television Production, 2006) Jones has written and presented other popular history programmes such as ??? Medieval Lives??™ (Terry Jones Medieval Lives, 2008) which make extensive use of jokes, puns and animated cartoons in the style of illuminated manuscripts to engage the viewer. Professor Barry Cunliffe of the University of Oxford is credited as series consultant. Jones quotes extensively from primary sources, including Priscus??™ account of his meeting with Attila. (Priscus, 5th Century AD) His argument that the Huns were victims of negative Christian Roman propaganda does not entirely hold up however. He makes no mention of the extreme violence employed by the Huns, and admits that lack of archaeological evidence makes further investigation of Hunnish culture problematic. ??? Heroes and Villains ??“ Attila the Hun??™ (BBC, 2007) ??? Fear works like witchcraft ??“ I exist to be feared??™ (Heroes and Villains, 2007) Attila tells his trusted companion Edeco in this BBC television docudrama. The programme is one of six hour-long dramatisations of the lives of historical characters including Attila the Hun, Napoleon and Cortes.

Attila was directed by Gareth Edwards and stars Rory McGann as Attila. The opening scene of ??? Attila??™ shows a Roman diplomatic envoy, Priscus, being ambushed by Huns on his way to Attila??™s encampment. Attila immediately kills the Hun fugitives brought by Priscus as a gift from the Emperor, thus setting the tone for the rest of the story. Interestingly, the

Huns have been given Scots accents, giving an immediate impression of the Huns as rebellious ??? outsiders??™, their accents in stark contrast to the upper-class English diction of the Romans diplomats. There is a voiceover narration provided by one of the main characters in the story. Edeco was a real-life character; a Hun commander and Attila??™s close friend.

The story of Attila??™s campaigns and battles against the Romans is narrated from Edeco??™s perspective of events. Much of the motivation for Attila??™s actions is revealed through dialogue with Edeco and others. Statements such as ??? We??™re a travelling circus, not an army. It??™s an act??™, and his observation that ??? Fear works like witchcraft ??“ I exist to be feared??™ (Heroes and Villains, 2007) demonstrate Attila??™s awareness of the importance of maintaining his mystique in the eyes of his enemies, and explain his use of extreme and gratuitous violence. The narrative closely follows existing prime source accounts of Attila??™s life, with the exception of his killing of his Breda, his co-ruler and brother. This event is shown as taking place spontaneously, in front of his horrified court, simply because his brother is prepared to accept tribute from the Romans and has no desire to wage war on them. There are also some notable omissions from the story, such as Honoria??™s proposal of marriage to Attila in 450 AD and Attila??™s encounter with Pope Leo I.

The story ends after Attila??™s defeat at the Battle of Chalons, where he is portrayed as a man utterly broken by his loss of face. ??? The myth of his invincibility had been shattered??™. (Heroes and Villains, 2007) He wishes only for death, has to be forcibly restrained from suicide and is no longer able to sustain the momentum of his campaign of terror. The film was made <https://assignbuster.com/popular-audio-visual-representations-of-historical-subject-matter-attila-the-hun/>

on a very small budget and shot on location in Bulgaria over three weeks, with the crowded battle scenes added in afterwards using computer-graphic imagery.

In an interview published on the fxguide. com website, director Gary Edwards says: ??? There are just over 250 visual effects in the film, all of which were created by myself from home, mainly using After Effects and Photoshop. I had about four months of post time to do this. There are supposed to be tens of thousands, but we just used four guys!??™ (Seymour, 2008) The title credits to each episode state: ??? This film depicts real events and real characters. It is based on the accounts of writers of the time. It has been written with the advice of modern historians.??™ (Heroes and Villains, 2007). In spite of the small budget, great care has been taken to ensure an authentic look to the film.

The actors are usually covered in mud, blood or both, action sequences are convincing, and there are no overt anachronisms in the costumes and settings. Props such as weapons, siege-engines and trebuchets are made from authentic materials. The music is orchestral and unobtrusive. This BBC production is successful as both as entertainment and as a documentary.??? Age of Empires II: Conquerors??™ (Ensemble Studios, 2001) The ??? Age of Empires??™ series of computer games are some of the most popular and critically acclaimed real-time computer strategy games ever developed and have sold more than 20 million copies worldwide. The series focuses on real historical civilizations ranging from the Stone Age to the present day. Real-time strategy games ??? involve constructing buildings and training troops and producing vehicles to command (usually called units) in battle on both <https://assignbuster.com/popular-audio-visual-representations-of-historical-subject-matter-attila-the-hun/>

the strategic and tactical levels. Real time refers to the pacing of the games?? meaning that the game progresses as time passes by rather than through a turn system as seen in turn-based strategy games.

RTS games can be set in contemporary times or the far past, future, or fantasy settings??™ (Roberts, 2010). The Age of Empires II: Conquerors expansion pack contains a campaign entitled Scourge of God based on the Hunnic invasion of the Roman Empire. Players can choose to play as El Cid, Montezuma or Attila the Hun. . According to Ensemble Studios game designer Greg Street: ??? The story is told from the point of view of a European veteran of these battles, now an aging priest in France??™. (Street, 2001) The game starts with Attila facing the challenge of removing his co-ruler brother Bleda from power and claiming outright leadership of the Huns. Players are given a choice of strategies: murder; engineering a fatal hunting accident or setting up a rival encampment which will provide the basis for a new civilization.

Once Bleda is removed from the scene, Attila??™s armies begin to invade the Danube, threaten Constantinople, and eventually attack Gaul and invade Italy. The Persians, Scythians and Romans can be chosen as either allies or targets. Subsequent campaigns involve Attila??™s challenges to the Eastern Roman Empire and his invasion of the Western Roman Empire.

Players achieve success or failure in the campaign through resource management: i. e. the acquisition of gold and superior technology, and the formation of strategic alliances. The quality of the computer graphics in this game is particularly high, with great attention paid to historical detail. Music

for the game was developed using authentic period instruments and is very atmospheric. The creators of ??? Age of Empires??™ credit some of the series??™ continuing popularity to its historical theme.

Chief game designer at Ensemble Studios Bruce Shelley states in an interview published on the ??? Gamespy??™ website that: ??? Parents tell Ensemble Studios that their kid is reading books about ancient Greece because they enjoy playing with the triremes so much, or that they want to check out books about medieval history because [the] game taught them what a trebuchet was.??™ (Rausch, 2005). Primary historical sources are not referred to in the game. Whilst some historical events and all geographical locations are broadly in line with known events, Shelley says: ??? People shouldnt get their history from Hollywood or video games??|??|were creating a commercial product here, a game that wed like to appeal to a lot of people. Creating a truly accurate historical videogame would not only touch on areas wed rather not deal with, in the end it just wouldnt be any fun.??™ (Rausch, 2005).

History-themed real-time strategy games do not claim to present an accurate interpretation of history, they are designed as entertainment and they do not offer a ??? dialogue with the past??™. (Carr, 1961) Instead, players are provided with a narrative framework within which they act out their own version of historical events. In this sense, they may be described as representative of Hayden White??™s post- modernist definition of history as: ??? a narrative discourse, the content of which is as much imagined as found??™. (White H, cited by O??™ Brien, P. K, 2001) ConclusionWe can

discern through analysis of the above texts that the myths surrounding Attila
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have been both perpetuated and challenged by film and documentary makers over the last sixty years. Some authors such as Terry Jones have used Attila's story to illustrate their own particular interpretation of historical events, while films such as *Attila, il flagello di Dio* have used Attila's story as an allegory of events which have occurred within living memory.

Much of the bad press Attila received can be interpreted as a need by contemporary writers to explain the poor military performance of the Romans against the Huns. It should be also remembered that Attila has not been universally reviled throughout history. He appears in the German *Nibelungenlied* for example, (*Nibelungenlied*, c. 1200 AD) in the guise of Etzel, an avenging hero. Historians continue to debate the importance of Attila's role in the collapse of the Roman Empire, whilst Attila's name remains a byword for cruelty and carnage in the popular imagination.

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