Gore Verbinski’s 2002 film *The Ring* is a remake of the popular Japanese horror movie *Ringu* (1998), directed by Hideo Nakata. Both films tell the story of a cursed videotape whose viewers die gruesome deaths seven days after they watch it. At the level of both plot and visual style, Verbinski’s departures from *Ringu* are deeply indebted to the conventions of the gothic novel, especially as they were mediated by European and American cinema. This gothic aesthetic “translates” *Ringu* into a more familiar Hollywood idiom for the benefit of North American viewers. Many of *The Ring*’s gothic innovations have long pedigrees, some of which stretch back to premodern painting and thought.

Take, for example, a scene from *The Ring* that has no precedent in *Ringu*. The film’s protagonist Rachel (played
by Naomi Watts) tries to uncover the secrets of the sinister video in the A/V lab of the newspaper where she works [Figs. 1, 2 and 3]. In the course of examining the recording’s bizarre procession of images, Rachel makes an alarming discovery. A fly that appears to be superimposed over a forlorn seascape pulsates with life even after she pauses the tape. The fly is in—but not of—the video recording. Mesmerized, Rachel reaches out to the screen and manages to pull the insect out of the television.

Fig. 1: Something strange afoot, The Ring

Fig. 2: Crossing worlds, The Ring
The Ring’s fly is part of a long aesthetic and intellectual history that equates knowledge of the cosmos with knowledge of the fly, and knowledge of the fly with its realistic capture by the visual arts. Its most obvious ancestor is the impudent fellow who seems to scurry across the bottom of the frame (also an optical illusion) of Petrus Christus’ Portrait of a Carthusian (1446), now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City [Fig. 4].

The boundary-defying fly is frequently found at the center of artistic and epistemological myths of origin, including the legendary beginning of cinematic special effects. Spanish cinematographer Segundo de Chomón—a pioneer of stop-motion photography—claimed that he stumbled upon the technique when a fly stumbled into his camera’s apparatus. When Chomón projected the invaded film, the insect seemed to move across the screen as if it were alive.¹ We encounter the fly at the supposed beginnings of modern painting, as well. In a legend popularized by Vasari, Giotto is said to have deceived his master Cimabue by painting a fly on the older artist’s canvas. When Cimabue tried to brush it away, the pupil’s superi-

¹ José María Candel, Historia del dibujo animado español (Murcia: Ed. Regional, 1993), 20.
ority was confirmed. For Vasari, Giotto’s triumph heralds a new era, a movement toward the unparalleled realism of mathematical perspective. The belief that medieval painting was archaic laid the groundwork for the eighteenth-century invention of the ambivalent, and always anachronistic, term “Gothic,” used to describe both late medieval artistic technique and the spirit of the Age.

Fig. 4: Petrus Christus, Portrait of a Carthusian, oil on wood. With permission of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Paradoxically, Giotto’s supposedly epoch-shifting “renaissance” fly actually has its origins in the “Gothic” era manuscript painting. The Visconti Hours’ (Florence:

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BNF Ms. BR 259, fol. 19) depiction of the creation of the Earth, painted around 1390, does not represent the fly to the same scale that it does other flora and fauna; instead, it renders it as though it has landed on the page. The flies arrayed around the “in principio” of *Genesis* reference a commentary tradition in which the fly was created belatedly, after Adam and Eve’s exile from Eden. This argument rested on the commonly held belief that the fly generated spontaneously from corrupt matter, and therefore inhabited a biological and eschatological temporality that overlapped with human history, but marched to a different tempo. It is not surprising, then, to find the trompe l’oeil fly looking from a distance onto the imagined end of times, as well—as one does beneath the famous painting of the Apocalypse in the *Très Riches Heures* (Chantilly: MC ms. 65, fol. 17r). Wherever there is an uncanny doubling of beginnings or an ending that is at the same time a new beginning, there you will find the haunt of the gothic fly.

![Fig. 5: Ambivalent Angels, Grizzly Man](image)

In its formal and thematic treatment of the fly, cinema is shaped by ideas and pictorial conventions—and ideas embedded within pictorial conventions—that one might be tempted to view as strictly “medieval.” Yet, they resound on into the age of cinema, making a mockery of tidy epochal distinctions. The unrealistic pitch and timbre
with which the fly is almost always rendered in sound cinema evokes the possibility that it hails from a different reality. The cinematic fly often seems like a divine herald of new beginnings or the harbinger of death. This is true not just of horror film, but even of documentary. Who has seen the final sequence of Werner Herzog’s *Grizzly Man* (2005) and not experienced the sensation that the flies that buzz about the camera and land on its lens are birds of bad omen or messengers from beyond our sensual world [Fig. 5]?

The moral of this manifesto: Film criticism should be considered part of what we do as medievalists, and not something that we do in addition to Medieval Studies.