



BRISTOL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH STUDIES

ISSUE 4 (SPRING 2014)





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Review: Richard Burt, *Medieval and Early Modern Film and Media* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 304.

Adam O'Brien

Cinema has often been described as a medium with deep and fundamental links to the twentieth century, an art form perfectly suited to a whole range of apparently twentieth-century themes and motifs: the car, the teenager, American global dominance, individualism, urbanization, celebrity, mechanized warfare. It is within such a context that *Medieval and Early Modern Film and Media* is at its most challenging and meaningful, inviting us to imagine a much richer and more complex historicisation of film. The title itself, although apparently straightforward in tone, is of course a joke or provocation of sorts. What, after all, is medieval film? It is typical of Burt's frustrating but stimulating book that this question goes unanswered, and perhaps even unasked.

This is a study which, early on, establishes a remarkable range of concerns, including: the cinematic paratext (and its echoes of early-modern 'textual marginalia'); historical film and its use of other media; the transition of celluloid to digital film; New Historicism (and, more specifically, its uncanny blindspots); authorship and authorial credibility. Rather than methodically demonstrate the connections between these, Burt throws them all in to the mix from the outset, and they – along with brief, anecdotal readings of Marx, Freud, Auerbach and Benjamin – are apparently meant to hover over the subsequent chapters. Some subjects (such as historicism) are engaged with quite directly, but others (such as digitality) seem to fall off the radar as soon as they are invoked. In what becomes something of a pattern, the book's undeniable ambition seems to trump its coherence and lucidity.

Chapter One works towards a series of short, sharp analyses of disparate films, including *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, *Anamorphosis*, *Day of Wrath* and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. It is built around the idea of the 'cinematographosphere' (Burt's term, adapted from Derrida's graphosphere), which is meant to allow us to 'rethink analogies between film and its precursors' by establishing an 'arena of ontological fragmentation rather than convergence'. Here and elsewhere, Burt has the unfortunate habit of distracting us from the precision and logic of his approach, which is actually much more interesting than an exercise in fragmentation. Rather it is a very deliberate challenge to certain conventions in film history

and medieval/early modern studies. He describes the contrasts between his case studies as generating 'a montage effect of shocking juxtaposition'. Again, I think the results are less spectacular and more interesting than this; it is difficult to imagine that any reader will be shocked by the interpretations, but they will certainly be stimulated by Burt's ability to bypass conventional notions of genre, historicism and canonicity and identify telling affinities between artists such as the Quay brothers, Carl Theodor Dyer, David Fincher and Terry Gilliam.

The interpretations developed in Chapter One are engaging to say the least, but they inevitably take liberties. Here is Burt on *Se7en* (David Fincher): 'Just as Doe cuts off skin from his fingers in order to avoid leaving incriminating fingerprints at his crime scenes, so Somerset is never able to get his hands on Doe' (46). The 'just as' is here asked to do an extraordinary amount of work, and it is the kind of flourish which displays relatively little regard for precise and reasoned interpretation. And so Chapters Two and Three, with their nuanced (and exhaustive) responses to *El Cid* and *Kingdom of Heaven* respectively, are vital to the book's success. As with other chapters, there is plenty here in the way of references and terminology to bewilder readers – Burt writes of *El Cid*'s 'specifically cinematic mimetic practice of circumfixion' (89) – but this tends to be very well illustrated by particular moments in the films. The analysis of *El Cid* shows Burt to be very astute when it comes to a film's graphic practices; blocking, framing, repetitive gestures, topography. And in *Kingdom of Heaven*, the author seems to have found something like an ideal case study, allowing him to weave together questions of historicism (Scott's film as 'a fantasy of (non)occupation' of Iraq), technology and the paratext (what can we learn from a film's seemingly endless stream of supplements and re-edits?) and interpretation (Burt is especially good here on questions of scale and perspective).

The book's final chapter and its epilogue (or 'Epilegomenon') are remarkable in their own way, as fresh approaches to film-historical studies (by way of paratexts) and New Historicism (by way of Freud) respectively, but, like the rich but dislocated introduction, they seem too removed from the book's main strategies. As well as these niggling structural quirks, there are also a number of out and out errors here, including misspelt names (Steven Spielberg, Vivian Sobchack) and mistaken dates for films. Reaching any kind of conclusion about a book such as this almost becomes a question of temperament – do we enjoy the intellectual boldness and imaginative reach, or complain that too much ground has been missed in the author's wild leaps between films, disciplines and time periods? Burt's introductory chapter concludes by mimicking the voice of a circus entertainer or fantastic storyteller: 'I invite you, strange(r)

reader, to get on the strange train of thought of this book... Be not afeared. Although we will have occasion to take detours... the wheels will not come off". I am not sure Burt entirely keeps to his promise on this final point, however fascinating the journey sometimes is.