
The wonderfully titled and handsomely produced Cinematic Illuminations: The Middle Ages on Film, with a stunning full-color photograph on the cover showing Heath Ledger on horseback in the last jousting sequence of A Knight’s Tale (dir. Brian Hegelund, 2001), joins the list, as it were, of a growing body of work in the field of what may be dubbed Movie Medievalism. Seamlessly cowritten in lucid prose, Cinematic Illuminations covers a wide range of mostly canonical films set in the Middle Ages. The book is divided into three sections, the first of which, “Theory and Methods of Cinematic Medievalism,” outlines their Slavoj Zizekian (neoLacanian) analysis of a “sociological stylistics” of film and locates their book in relation to debates about cinematic fidelity to history (or what counts as history for historians or for New Historicians). Monty Python and the Holy Grail (dir. Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones, 1975) features extensively both in this section and in the beginning of the second section of the book, “The Politics of Cinematic Medievalism.” Here Finke and Shichtman devote four chapters to films related to King Arthur, Joan of Arc, William Wallace, and the Crusades. The third and last section of the book, “Cinematic Medievalism and the Anxieties of Modernity,” takes up three European films on the Holy Grail (Robert Bresson’s Lancelot du lac [1974], Eric Rohmer’s Perceval [1978], and Hans-Jürgen Syberberg’s film of Richard Wagner’s Parsifal [1981]); films on “apocalyptic medievalism” (Vincent Ward’s The Navigator [1988], Ingrid Bergman’s The Seventh Seal [1957] and Virgin Spring [1960]; and films about the “teen Middle Ages” (A Knight’s Tale and Gil Junger’s The Black Knight [2001]). The well-researched book comes with a bibliography (twenty-two pages) and index. Although Cinematic Illuminations covers many of the same films and topics as does John Aberth’s A Knight at the Movies (2003), Cinematic Illuminations is not only more up-to-date but far superior in its readings, leaving Aberth’s mediocre book flat on its back, so to speak.

The book’s desire to theorize the study of movie medievalism in early Zizekian terms (ideology critique via Lacan as enacted in Zizek’s The Sublime Object of Ideology [1989] and Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture [1992]) and a few other similar works) is certainly laudable, as is the authors’ desire to attend to film form. While a welcome and significant contribution to the field, it is disappointing, then, that Cinematic Illuminations falls well short of its aims. Rather than practice a new synthesis of Zizekian film theory and formal attentiveness, Cinematic Illuminations quickly lapses into a quite conventional and by now quite familiar sort of psychologizing cultural studies that focuses on the anxieties of gender, race, sexuality, and postcolonialism (equally applicable to all media). Finke and Shichtman offer moral judgments on the politics of the various films they discuss, and, perhaps in spite of themselves, often resort to a subversion/containment template, or boilerplate, for their largely thematic readings. For example, Finke and Shichtman conclude their lengthy discussion of Gil Junger’s mall film The Black Knight by concluding that the film’s African American hero “may be a better man for his excellent medieval adventures, but he is still black, poor, underemployed and living in the hood” (p. 364). Similarly, Zizek’s Lacanian practice of “traversing the fantasy” turns out, in Finke and Schichtman’s hands, to be an old-school mode of demythologization, sometimes issuing in tepid film appreciation or mild film denunciation. Films like John Logan’s Camelot (1967)
and Mel Gibson’s *Braveheart* (1995) “are not particularly interested in . . . facts; they prefer the legends” (p. 194). By contrast, the directors “Youssef Chahine, Dominique Othenin-Girard, and Ridley Scott . . . seek, in very interesting ways, to derive a politics of peace for the present by re-imagining the violence of the past” (p. 194). One misses here even the most elementary formulation of a given film’s contradiction, a basic symptomatic reading attentive to the specificity of a film’s gaps, silences, excesses, and so on. Instead, Shichtman and Finke read films as monologues and group them together according to whether their “politics” are good or bad.

Film stills in the book are used in several ways—all of them symptomatic of the limits the authors place on their readings: in three instances, the film still is juxtaposed with a noncinematic illustration meant to seem related: a crane shot from of the Round table in John Boorman’s *Excalibur* (1981) appears opposite facing a flat perspective illustration of the Round Table in the medieval illuminated manuscript *Wigalois*; a high-angle long shot of Mila Jovovich as Joan of Arc in Luc Besson’s *The Messenger* (1999) as she stirs up the sleeping troops with her arms outspread is set against a Christological (medium shot, low angle) illustration of a beatific Joan of Arc with her arms outspread taken from the cover of Octave Guillonnet’s book *Jeanne d’Arc* (1912); and a close up of Maria Falconetti as the martyr Joan of Arc in Carl Dreyer’s *Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) faces an image of Jesus (a “close up”) wearing the “Crown of Thorns” taken from a “holy card” (p. 122). In three other instances, the film still is used to illustrate a point about the film being discussed; and in the other twelve instances, the film still is purely decorative. The lack of purpose in the great majority of the stills is indicative of the authors’ peculiar practice of formalist nonreading. Here, taken at random, is their discussion of a fight sequence in *Braveheart* (1995):

The sequence . . . brings together the various strands of our argument, illustrating the means by which Gibson constructs Wallace as a mythic hard-bodied saint. The sequence which is fairly simple on paper . . . makes Wallace’s apotheosis into warrior cinematic. In this highly stylized sequence time is dilated; Gibson draws out the action, increasing its suspense and lyricism, by drastically varying film speed, combining slow motion photography with fast cutting. The scene takes more than three minutes of screen time and consists of nearly sixty shots. Throughout the sequence, shots of the English fortress . . . are intercut with the briefest of glimpses of Wallace. . . . All of the cinematic devices in the scene are used to mark Wallace as a legendary, even mythic, hero” (p. 190).

In other words, Mel Gibson does a good job at doing what any competent film director of a big budget mainstream film epic about a warrior hero would do. There is no point in using stills because they illustrate the quite obvious ways in which any filmmaker will make a film about a warrior hero (one could chart *Braveheart’s* generic fight sequences in relation to a progression of technical developments in film dating back to films as differently edited as Sergei Eisenstein’s *Alexander Nevsky* [1938] in “full screen” aspect ratio; the widescreen aspect ratio of Kubrick’s *Spartacus* [1960], Anthony Mann’s *El Cid* [1961], David Lean’s *Lawrence of Arabia* [1962], and Orson Welles’s *Chimes at Midnight* [1965]; and, then, extending forward, to CGI and the standard *Matrix* time-slice editing in Ridley Scott’s *Gladiator* [2000], Wolfgang Peterson’s *Troy* [2004], and *A Knight’s Tale*, then developed
even more fully in the digital film punched-in, slow-mo, postproduction fight sequences of recent films such as 300 [dir. Zach Snyder, 2006] and Ridley Scott’s Robin Hood [2010]). The “cinematic” techniques to which Finke and Shichtman call attention in a sequence in Braveheart are by no means specific to Braveheart. The possibility of a close reading disappears into comments on what we can easily observe for ourselves.

Describing the kinds and (approximate) number of shots used in a film sequence is not the same thing as describing the film sequence, as V. F. Perkins showed long ago in Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies (1972). Nor does film description, of course, count much as an analysis and interpretation. Instead of doing careful, close film analysis, Shichtman and Finke adopt the same moralistic rhetoric to describe films made decades apart in the exact same terms. Like Braveheart, “El Cid embraces the masculinist warrior ethos of the epic film” (p. 206). Shichtman and Finke contrast a supposedly effeminate (equals weak) Spanish King in El Cid to the evil Arab “Yussef and El Cid’s hard-bodied masculinities” (p. 206). (Oddly enough, no attention is paid to the women characters in the film.) Finke and Shichtman’s attempts to historicize the films they discuss in relation to events occurring around the moment of the film’s production is constantly overridden by Finke and Shichtman’s flat, ahistorical rhetoric.

On balance, Cinematic Illuminations is a very balanced book. Perhaps too balanced. Finke and Shichtman could easily have grouped films together in more intellectually adventurous, if still thematic ways. Bergman’s Virgin Spring could have been put in the teen Middle Ages chapter by putting it into dialogue with Wes Craven’s low-budget horror film Last House on the Left (1972; in an extra on the most recent DVD edition, Craven says that his film is a remake of Virgin Spring). Finke and Shichtman might have chosen to discuss some less well-known films. For example, the postapocalyptic medievalist Doomsday (dir. Niel Marshall, 2008) would have made a startling addition to the apocalyptic Middle Ages chapter. Everyone is entitled to choose his or own films to discuss, of course. Still, one wishes that the authors of Cinematic Illuminations had tried harder to unseat more of what editors would call Finke and Shichtman’s competitors in the field, especially those who are less balanced and therefore more engaging. Then it might have been really good as opposed to being interesting but pedestrian.

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Norbert Kössinger’s Otfrid’s Evangelienbuch in der frühen Neuzeit, a doctoral dissertation accepted by the University of Munich, contains seven main chapters and a long appendix of edited and (partially) translated source materials. The overarching concern of the book is stated in its first sentence: “Dieses Buch beschäftigt sich mit der Wiederentdeckung und Erforschung des Evangelienbuchs Otfrids von Weißenburg vom Ende des 15. bis zum ersten Drittel des 19. Jahrhunderts.” The starting point of Kössinger’s investigation is the Liber de scriptoribus ecclesiasticis by Johannes Trithemius, which was completed in 1494. This catalogue (re)introduced Otfrid’s name and work to literary history by providing a few biographical lines about the monk along with a list of nine titles attributed to his hand. Though