

rebecca a. umland and samuel j. umland, *The Use of the Arthurian Legend in Hollywood Film: From Connecticut Yankees to Fisher Kings*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996. Pp. xv, 205. ISBN: 0-313-29798-3. \$55.

This study of cinematic versions of the Arthurian legend—the authors dismiss the term ‘Arthurian film’ as a ‘collocation’—begins with the premise that these versions of the legend should be assessed not by narrative conventions but by conventions that govern the visual medium which filmmakers have chosen for expression. Such a view grants to filmmakers the same license critics have long been willing to grant to writers throughout the ages who have balanced a ‘tyranny of tradition’ with their own originality in retelling the legend of Arthur.

In chapter one, the authors present an overview of the legend of Arthur and its transmission from medieval to modern times. In chapter two, they borrow a phrase from Umberto Eco to compare five film versions of Twain’s *Connecticut Yankee* and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* as ‘intertextual collages.’ In Chapter 3, they discuss *Knights of the Round Table*, *Sword of Lancelot*, *Camelot*, and *First Knight* as Hollywood melodramas. In chapter four, they evaluate *The Black Knight*, *Siege of the Saxons*, and *The Sword in the Stone* as propaganda films. In chapter five, they consider *Excalibur* in light of the tradition of the Hollywood epic, and in chapter six, they link *Knightriders*, *The Natural*, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, and *The Fisher King* as cinematic versions of the postmodern quest. A filmography and seven stills supplement the discussions of these films.

In theory, the approach adopted by the Umlands makes sense. In practice, however, their study more often disappoints than rewards. First, the authors begin with the premise that much—if not all—previous discussion of the cinematic tradition of the Arthurian legend is simply wrong. They are especially dismissive of a largely unnamed group of academics—the authors are both on the faculty of the University of Nebraska at Kearney—who cry foul when films fail to follow putative literary sources. At other times, naming names, the authors offer contradictory readings to those advanced by fellow academics that seem to cloud rather than illuminate the issues contested. Thus I am wrong to have suggested in *Cinema Arthuriana* (1991) that George Romero’s *Knightriders* is a biker film in the tradition of the American film western—a view generally accepted by film critics of all stripes (for horses read motorcycles). The Umlands contend that the biker film is really a subgenre of the juvenile delinquency film. Film directors too get their comeuppance in this study. Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones are, for instance, wrong in some of the comments they make about their film in the commentary included on the laser disc version of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

Throughout their study, the authors miss obvious connections and instead find connections that may well escape their readers. Their use of the term ‘Hollywood film,’ for instance, requires some expansiveness if it is to define a group of films that includes *Excalibur*, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, and a television version of Twain’s novel. The ‘bowdlerized treatment of the adultery’ in *First Knight* links, the Umlands argue, that film to *Fatal Attraction* and *License to Kill* as part of Hollywood’s

'conservative response to sexual license after the advent of AIDS.' What is more likely at work here is a continuing shift in Hollywood's depiction of the male (and female). The brutality of Rambo is out, and post-*Iron John* sensitivity is in.

Linking *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* with five film treatments of Twain's novel rather than with the Grail films it spoofs is also less than illuminating. What would have been interesting is a more thorough examination of the Twain films. But too often in this study, thorough examination is replaced by long passages of biographical and other background material drawn from standard general reference works. The Umlands' study would have been more insightful and valuable had they perhaps addressed the issue of what happens to satire when a filmmaker decides to soften its bite. Does satire become comedy, parody of satire, melodrama, or something even more benign? In the case of *Connecticut Yankee*, the novel has been reduced to little more than cinematic juvenilia in Disney's *Unidentified Flying Oddball*, the 1989 television version, and the more recent Canadian *A Young Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and American *A Kid in King Arthur's Court*. The ending of Twain's novel survives in only two film versions, 'Knights Must Fall,' a 1949 Bugs Bunny short (my thanks to Professor Michael N. Salda of the University of Southern Mississippi for alerting me to this cartoon), and a sixty minute version shown on PBS in 1978—a 1970 Australian feature-length cartoon version arms the final combatants with harmless air and water guns.

Throughout, this book, which at \$55.00 is overpriced, could have benefited from some judicious editing. Too often, discussions are padded with unnecessary asides and background material. The authors are also a bit stingy in their use of film stills. The seven stills are grouped toward the beginning of the book, and the latest still is from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. As the Arthurian legend continues to fascinate and attract filmmakers, there is a need for continued study of their cinematic retellings of that legend. The Umlands' study, unfortunately, adds little to our understanding of these retellings.

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