



Reviews

SUSAN ARONSTEIN, *Hollywood Knights: Arthurian Cinema and the Politics of Nostalgia*. Studies in Arthurian and Courtly Cultures. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Pp. viii, 264. ISBN: 1-4039-6649-4. \$65.

The Middle Ages undergoes continual rebirth as each succeeding generation turns back to history to consider issues directly relevant to the present, and Hollywood Arthuriana offers an especially fertile field for studying such mythopoetic cultural appropriations. From this perspective, Susan Aronstein examines the trajectory of cinematic retellings of the Arthurian legend, discerning how Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table reflect the American zeitgeist throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. For Aronstein, Arthurian films participate in ideological constructions of American identities based upon a sense of nostalgia for an ostensibly simpler and more chivalric history by co-opting the Middle Ages as the birthplace of American values. As such, she proposes that these cinematic texts must be seen within an Althusserian scheme of ideology, in which subjects are hailed and interpellated into an ideological order.

Aronstein begins with a necessarily rushed overview of medievalism's historical advent in America and Arthur's literary roots in Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*. She interprets Richard Thorpe's *The Knights of the Round Table* and Henry Hathaway's *Prince Valiant*, created under the harsh glare of McCarthyism and HUAC, as focusing on the dangers inherent from the enemy within by recasting Arthurian villains into proto-Communist subversives. In the 1960s, Disney's *Sword in the Stone* affirms America's belief in individualism and technology, and Joshua Logan's *Camelot* soothes a country torn apart by generational conflicts in its depiction of proper filial duty in Tom of Warwick. Cornel Wilde's *The Sword of Lancelot* and Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones's *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* deconstruct the myths of Camelot, responding respectively to the countercultural pressures of the 1960s and the deconstructivist tendencies of the 1970s. Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* recreates the Arthurian legend in light of Ronald Reagan's presidency and the reviving of 'traditional' values, whereas George Romero's *Knightriders*, John Boorman's *Excalibur*, and Terry Gilliam's *The Fisher King* question the cultural turn to conservatism. Twain's *Connecticut Yankee* formula has long been a staple of Hollywood fare, in versions starring Will Rogers and Bing Crosby as well as later, modernized retellings (*Unidentified Flying Oddball*, *A Kid in King Arthur's Court*, and *Black Knight*), and the time-travel formula of each of these

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films allows its protagonists to mediate between the modern and the medieval. The volume concludes with analyses of Jerry Zucker's *First Knight* (with Arthur figured as a post-Cold War leader) and Antoine Fuqua's *King Arthur* (a recasting of post-9/11 America as a fading imperialist power).

Aronstein's focus on Hollywood Arthuriana and American politics unites her analysis into a nearly seamless whole, but more attention could be paid to international politics as well. For example, discussions labeled 'From 1968–1974: America Cracks' and 'Genre Trouble: Hollywood in the 1970s' precede her analysis of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, but surely a British film unaffiliated with Hollywood is in some manner responding to issues on the home front as well as in America. And although Aronstein's analyses of the films are convincing throughout, she focuses primarily on the narrative qualities of the films rather than their cinematic aspects. Beyond John Boorman and Terry Gilliam, little attention is paid to the creative forces behind the films, nor to the stars who embody the characters and the ways in which actors are deployed as semiotic shorthands for particular values. Also, insufficient attention is paid to the cinematic technologies behind the spectacles.

Such quibbling points, however, do not detract from Aronstein's great accomplishments in *Hollywood Knights*, a work that sets a high standard of excellence for studying films of the Middle Ages. Leading the scholarly analysis of medieval film beyond the detection of anachronism, Aronstein captures the ideological importance of texts that many viewers—both academic and lay—might dismiss as fluff. Such is the working of ideology, however, to imbue even ostensibly negligible texts with deep cultural meaning, and Aronstein astutely captures this unbearable weight of fluff.

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