

Race, Class and Gender in 'Medieval' Cinema

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Reading this book is a little like reading something in a foreign language one has not completely mastered. There is little pleasure in the experience and one is often unsure of the meaning, although one suspects that it would be wrong simply to assume that there is no meaning at all. But it is hard work. What is to be made of propositions such as: 'Popular culture's fascination with celluloid history never allows it to tire of imbuing medieval myth with the imprimatur of the Zeitgeist' (p. 94); or *A Knight's Tale* consolidates a version of Chaucerian authority visually calibrated to promote a fiction of identity' (p. 183)?

However, this language is familiar to some. It does not yet have its own dictionary but one would be easy to produce. On page 7 of this book we find a starter's lexicon: 'alterity', 'the Other', 'postcolonial', 'empowering', 'self-empowerment', 'encode', 'reencodes'. It is a language one can learn. And clearly a generation or two of students in US departments of English and modern languages has done so. In fact, this volume can be approached anthropologically, as a window onto the language and assumptions of progressive academics in US English and literature departments.

The films discussed tend to fall into two groups: on the one hand, recent (and usually forgettable) US productions, such as *King Arthur* or *Kingdom of Heaven*; on the other, older, foreign films, like *The Seven Samurai* (Japan, 1954), *Les visiteurs du soir* (France, 1942) or *Saladin* (Egypt, 1963). Whether the exclusion of the great European art movies (*The Seventh Seal*, *Andrei Rublev*) as well as the classic Hollywood blockbusters (*Braveheart*, *El Cid*) was an editorial decision or pure happenstance is not clear.

The fact that the contributors are, for the most part, in literature departments may explain some features of the book, notably the way that films are analysed almost entirely in terms of the aesthetic and ideological impact of the end product. There is virtually no exploration of the process of creation, such as could be revealed by studio archives or interviews with participants. Behind any film lies a large body of decisions, economic, creative, and ideological. This helps explain what a film is like. There is nothing wrong with film criticism that follows the usual model of literary criticism but it does not tell the whole story of film production.

The absence of historians from the book may also lie behind such ridiculous assertions as ‘class structures remain one of the least explored territories of medieval life’ (p. 4). Consultation of the footnotes at this point shows that what is meant by ‘class structures’ is ‘class structures as revealed in medieval literature’ (the notes lead us to such works as *Class and Gender in Early English Literature* and to ‘the debate about the audience and authorship of the fabliaux’). The huge bibliography on medieval class structures—even the huge Marxist bibliography—seems to have been overlooked. The claim that class structures are unexplored must mean that scholars of literature do not pay sufficient attention to class structures (itself a debatable proposition). No-one should be blamed for not knowing the scholarly publications outside their own discipline (there is plenty enough within it) but they should know that they do not know.

It is perhaps then no surprise that the politics implied in the volume is not class-based, is certainly not Marxist, and has no place for the organized working class; what we have is the lifestyle and identity politics characteristic of the American dissident intelligentsia. ‘Class’ here often boils down to an endorsement of what used to be called ‘the common man’. ‘Gender’ translates as praise for films with ‘strong women’. Tellingly, race, class, and gender are described as ‘this triad of modern anxieties’ (p. 5). The psychologism of modern American culture has often been remarked and this is a striking example. The injustices, repression, stunted lives, brutalities, and absurdities of our ingrained systems of race, class, and gender hierarchy are more than ‘anxieties’ and are certainly not only ‘modern’. To turn in this way from the realities of social power and exclusion to contemporary ‘anxieties’ verges on intellectual narcissism.

Some familiar villains are targeted: ‘The fantasy of the Middle Ages has always been the exclusive province of European colonialism, representing the historical legitimization of white, Christian, European domination’ (p. 107). ‘Always’ and ‘exclusive’ are dangerous words to use. Whatever one thinks of the plausibility of William Morris’s image of an integrated, craft-based, proto-socialist, medieval world of guilds or of the idea of *convivencia*—happy co-existence of religions—in medieval Spain, or any other of the liberal and radical strands of medievalism, they must at least be recognized. But the scholarship here is often of the self-reinforcing kind. Citations reveal the usual suspects: Homi Bhaba, Foucault, Edward Said, Bakhtin (‘As Michael Bakhtin has argued, any sign is a site of ideological contestation’ (p. 109)), a little invocation of Derrida (a Samurai who is willing to use a dead Samurai’s sword is ‘like a Derridean bricoleur’ (p. 67)).

Although the contributors live in the delightful groves of academe, their world is full of dangers. An alert inquisitorialism is their response. ‘Presentism’ must be ‘exposed’ (p. 3); historians are ‘not exempt from accusations of ahistoricity’—indeed ‘solipsistic presentism’ is a ‘threat’ (p. 4); the editors are ‘suspicious of truth claims in documentary’ (p. 11); the film critic Edward Turk ‘falls prey to the duality of medievalism’ (p. 143), while, on the other hand, Carolyn Dinshaw ‘rightly takes to task Bhaba’s reading of the medieval’ (p. 153). She is not the only one taking to task: Patrick Geary is praised for taking nationalism to task (p. 57). All this exposure, accusation, suspicion, and taking to task does of course raise up (ironically) the image of McCarthyism and (sadly) the starker discipline of Stalinism. Fortunately the faultfinding and denunciations of American academia, while leaving an unhappy image of a querulous and morally self-

righteous tribe, do not generate blacklists or purges.

In some ways, the thinking behind this volume is a little like that behind a far less theoretical work, Jack G. Shaheen's *Reel Bad Arabs* (New York, 2001), which lists over nine hundred Hollywood films with depictions of Arabs, appraises the stereotypes in them, and awards them points on how sympathetic or hostile they are. It includes a 'Best List' and a 'Worst List' based on these criteria. The contributors to this volume talk a more stylish talk but their moralism is the same—although Shaheen makes a much better read.

One of the great advances in human freedom in the last fifty years has been the elimination, in North America and western Europe, of the legal and (to a lesser degree) the social repression of consensual adult homosexual activity. A curious by-product in academia has been the growth of 'Queer Studies'. 'Queer' is one of the those interesting words, like 'nigger', that is both a traditional (even slightly dated) term of abuse and also a piece of self-labelling employed by some members of the abused group. 'Queering' has indeed become a semi-methodological term in some strands of literature and 'Theory'. In this book, a note on p. 10 contains a quite full bibliography of recent publications on medieval sexuality, which include *Queer Love in the Middle Ages*, *Queering Medieval Genres* (by one of the co-authors of this volume), *Chaucer's Queer Nation*, and *Queering the Middle Ages*. Queer Theory is not simply the understandable urge to write homosexuality back into the story, to reveal those who were 'hidden from history', as earlier feminist scholarship sought to do in the case of women. Queerness has a hint of the metaphysical. When Tison Pugh asserts that 'the queerness of all human bodies' lies in the fact that 'they are ultimately beyond our control' (p. 134) we are surely in the realm of the unprovable and unfalsifiable.

But there are good things here. John Ganim's piece on the film *Saladin* by the Egyptian director Youssef Chahine, situates Chahine in his cultural and political context very well: his Christian and Alexandrian background, his complex relationship with the Nasser regime, the influence of both western and Soviet cinema. Ganim points out the very 'Hollywood' character of *Saladin*: 'it resembles in some respects the Hollywood versions of the Crusades that it seeks to answer' (p. 45) and has an 'anomalous relation ... to the other more complex and self-reflective films of Chahine's oeuvre' (p. 46). Perhaps in this respect it is Chahine's equivalent of Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky*, his most Hollywood film. (Incidentally, *Saladin* now has a relatively large English language literature, as it is also discussed at length in John Aberth's recent book on medieval film (*A Knight at the Movies*, (New York, 2003).) Ganim also outlines the parallel between medievalism and orientalism which he has expounded at greater length in his book of that title (New York and Basingstoke, 2005). The common features are 'colorful excess, emphasis on the heroic pride of the protagonists, regressive social conditions, autocratic and aristocratic rule' (p. 50). *Saladin* dates to 1963. Remarkably, Chahine was still directing films in 1997, the date of his *Destiny*, a film discussed in this volume by Don Hoffman, who is interested in the way the director attempts 'to destabilize the Otherness of the Other' (p. 34). Hoffman is also interested in Chahine's sexuality and returns, rather insistently, to a scene in the film in which two brothers embrace: is it 'a campy reinvention of a Hollywood cliché ... a momentary gay fantasy' or, more personally, 'a lushly romantic moment that I can imagine some conflicted young Cairene treasuring in his heart' (pp. 35, 40). This tireless pursuit of the homoerotic is characteristic.

Also worth reading is Arthur Lindley, who develops the ideas on 'the ahistoricism of medieval film' set out in his stimulating 1998 article of that title. He demonstrates cogently that virtually no feature of the character 'Balian' in *Kingdom of Heaven* corresponds to the historical Balian, leaving us with the intriguing question of why, when virtually all historical reality is removed, film-makers should still chose to use named and dateable characters and events. There are other options. As Lindley observes, 'the overwhelming majority of medieval films deal with legendary material—King Arthur, Robin Hood—or openly fictitious characters' (p. 19). But time and again film-makers invoke only to distort historical characters and settings. Sometimes this is simple artistic sense—no-one misses the actual third brother in the sibling rivalry depicted in *El Cid*—but sometimes it grates: why does *Braveheart* open by giving a historical date inaccurate by a few years and later suggest that the eighteenth-century banning of the bagpipes took place in Lowland Scotland in the thirteenth century?

Lindley points out the way *Kingdom of Heaven* has upset both Christians and Muslims: 'What unites these

two parties is the assumption that what they are judging is or ought to be a historical document combined, rather awkwardly, with the assumption that the film is all about the present ' (pp. 17–18). A similar awkward assumption characterizes some of the contributors to this volume, including the editors, who at one moment endorse the hope that a film about the Middle Ages will 'get it right' (p. 2) while also 'being skeptical of documentary-style truth value in narrative' (p. 11).

One of the contributors to this volume laments that 'It has become virtually a commonplace among medievalists to decry the indifference of our students, our colleagues, and our publishers to our work' (p.108). This indifference, if indeed it exists, might be dispelled by vigorous empirical scholarship expressed in lucid prose.

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