

Richard Burt. *Medieval and Early Modern Film and Media*.

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. xiv + 280 pp. \$29. ISBN: 978-0-230-10560-7.

The title of Richard Burt's monograph, *Medieval and Early Modern Film and Media*, belies the larger purview and purposes of this text. Like much of Burt's work, this book displays a dizzying array of ideas and information and speaks intelligently on all of it. Burt's knowledge of his diverse texts and subjects in this book is minute and encyclopedic. To a reader, this can be both exhilarating and exhausting. The book ostensibly speaks of the relationship between the media of medieval and early modern texts, including tapestry and illuminated manuscripts, and cinematic media of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. What might surprise one unfamiliar with Burt's scholarly work is that the book compulsively revolves around Freud's concepts of the uncanny and the spectral, drawing (often evocative) comparisons between diverse media and these notions. He argues, "[T]ransitions in film and media may be more aptly described . . . as a dialectic of reanimation and de-animation, . . . as living dead media" (29), and new media are palimpsests and "returns" to older media, making all media sites of "mediatic haunting" (34). Burt applies these Freudian ideas to historicism, New and old, as well as historians, specifically Natalie Zemon Davis and Stephen Greenblatt. Burt does not defend the veracity of Freud's notions, which many psychiatrists, among others, have attacked; rather, he uses them as analytical tools to deconstruct the mechanisms and methodologies of historicism, historians, and New Historicism. Indeed, for better or for worse, depending on one's expectations, this is a much more comprehensive endeavor than the book's title indicates.

Medieval and Early Modern Film and Media is extremely well researched, and its weighty theoretical underpinnings are everywhere evident in his manifold citations of Freud, Genette, Derrida, Auerbach, Said, Benjamin, Mulvey, and several other usual suspects. His synthesis and application of these theorists is often impressive. However, it is difficult not to feel that Burt is trying to deal with too much in this book, which may be laudable but can also be troublesome. There are a number of places in the book where the argument feels strained, even occasionally stretched rice-paper thin in order to come to the conclusion the author (devoutly) wished to make; although it seems he was forced to undertake a grand leap of faith to arrive at the "consummation." Perhaps, the excess in the text can be seen most clearly in the writing style and structure. There is no doubt that Burt is a master wordsmith. He is frequently wordy, but his playful approach to language is engaging. Nevertheless, the writing in this book is often convoluted, featuring Ciceronian periodic sentences peppered generously with Burt's own neologisms and a heavy helping of theoretical jargon. Consider this fragment discussing the film *El Cid* (dir. Anthony Mann, 1961): "The phantomimetic cinematic paratext deconstructs the framing function, becoming a supplementary parergon much like *El Cid's* breastplate" (105). One may also see Burt's coinages in chapter titles, such as this one for chapter 2: "The Passion of *El Cid* and the Circumfixion of Cinematic History: Stereotypology/Phantomimesis/Crytomorphoses" (75). Phrasing and

verbiage of this ilk has a tendency to obfuscate the book's main arguments, which are often valuable and might be better served with a more lucid treatment. Nonetheless, a few of Burt's new terms have the potential to be quite useful in the areas of film theory and criticism, such as *mise-hors-scène*, which refers to "the paratextual supplements [that] are meant to serve as interpretive guides to the film by standing apart from the film" (109). Burt is a creative scholar known for pushing the boundaries in his work, and this book accomplishes that with panache.

In light of this text's elaborate style and its assumption that its readers have intimate knowledge of a host of theorists and schools of knowledge (e.g., psychoanalysis, deconstruction, New Historicism), truly, this is a book for other scholars of film and medieval and early modern literature. It is a niche audience, but one that is growing larger and more diverse every year. Though much of this book focuses on historicism(s) and historians, as it interrogates the practices of both, the conclusions made have the potential to offend scholars in those realms. This book will be useful particularly for those who are working on the films Burt discusses at length, especially *El Cid, Kingdom of Heaven* (dir. Ridley Scott, 2005), and *The Return of Martin Guerre* (dir. Daniel Vigne, 1981). Burt has done much fine work in this book: it is erudite, playful, and challenging.

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