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Curious Perspectives on the Middle Ages**

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Medievalism and Anamorphosis: Curious Perspectives on the Middle Ages

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Let's begin with two exemplary images, exemplary among other things of the instability of images. In the first, private detective Philip Marlowe goes calling on four million dollars in his best powder-blue suit. Whimsical and suspicious of appearances, Marlowe pauses to contemplate "a piece of stained-glass romance":

The main hallway of the Sternwood place was two stories high. Over the entrance doors, which would have let in a troop of Indian elephants, there was a broad stained-glass panel showing a knight in dark armor rescuing a lady who was tied to a tree and didn't have any clothes on but some very long and convenient hair. The knight had pushed the vizor of his helmet back to be sociable, and he was fiddling with the knots on the ropes that tied the lady to the tree and not getting anywhere. I stood there and thought that if I lived in the house, I would sooner or later have to climb up there and help him. He didn't seem to be really trying.¹

This ekphrasis in the second paragraph of Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* is positively resplendent with irony, an irony refracted through Marlowe's distinctively hard-boiled perspective. While it doesn't describe any particular stained glass panel, the sources and the style of the image are unmistakably Pre-Raphaelite. Still, details like the "dark armor," or "long and convenient hair," or the suspiciously long time the hero takes in freeing the naked woman do have direct and revealing sources. The PG-rated hair and the sadomasochistic insinuation come straight from *The Earthly Paradise* of William Morris; the dark armor and the courteous bit with the helmet were also likely suggested by Edward Burne-Jones' Perseus Series.² In Morris' *Earthly Paradise* the hero discovers Andromache exposed as a sacrificial victim, "naked, except for the tresses of her hair," but it takes him some three hundred lines to get round to setting her loose. Burne-Jones' illustration of the episode dispenses with the convenient hair—bound like her hands behind her back—and it shows Perseus courteously doffing his helmet rather than his visor—a knowing picture, then, of love (and lust) at first sight.

¹ Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992 [1939]), 1.

² The story is narrated in "April: The Doom of King Acrisius." William Morris, *The Earthly Paradise*, 2 vols., ed. Florence S. Boos (New York: Routledge, 2002), 267-348. For the series of paintings of Perseus and Andromache see Christofer Conrad, et al., *Edward Burne-Jones, The Earthly Paradise* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2010).

The stained-glass ekphrasis also frames Chandler's whole novel, which takes further cues from Morris and Burne-Jones. Fully aware that the classical myth has a celebrated analogue in the story of St. George, Morris creates a chivalric romance in which a dying Fisher King presides over a wasteland beset by a dragon that must be propitiated with human sacrifice. Chandler's Fisher King is the crippled and dying General Sternwood; its dragon takes the form of organized crime in Los Angeles. The general's daughter, Carmen, is rendered helpless by an ether-laced cocktail and exposed naked to a blackmailer's camera. Marlowe extricates her from this compromising situation, but the endless, seemingly immortal dragon headed by the mobster Eddie Mars remains impervious to Marlowe's attempts to destroy it. Los Angeles remains an irredeemable wasteland.

But to return to the stained glass image and Marlowe's whimsical impulse to climb up and lend a hand: The detective's off-color joke says as much about his own desires as it does about the transparent sexual fetishes of Pre-Raphaelite medievalism. Marlowe wants to enter the world of the panel—and in a sense he does so in the narrative that follows—yet the gumshoe chevalier can neither fully merge with this chivalric ideal, nor ever manage to convince himself that sirens are actually damsels in distress. The same is true in a larger, more extensive sense of Chandler's noir fiction. Nostalgia is present in abundance, but the real world can only ever return a debased reflection of the ideal image, just as *The Big Sleep* offers a noiresque distortion of “stained-glass romance.”

The juxtaposition of the stained-glass panel with its hard-boiled after-image is also emblematic of my fascination with cross-media adaptations and the dynamics of perspective. In this brief essay, I want to begin vetting an approach to medievalism that theorizes this discourse in terms of the transformative power of perspective. Looking at perspective in medievalism encourages us to attend to things embedded or implicit, things that only become evident from a point of view markedly awry. Interactions among different forms of media play an integral part in the history of medievalism and should play a larger role in our theoretical accounts. Anamorphic art functions in this way: from a determined perspective a human skull appears floating in front of Holbein's ambassadors; a grotesque caricature of Edward VI takes on more conventional proportions; rectified portraits of the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor emerge from proto-impressionistic woodcuts.³

In a related way, Marlowe's take on the stain of sexuality in stained glass romance is a function of anamorphic perspective. As he identifies the sadomasochism implicit in the chivalric scene, we in turn identify him with this perspective, a curious combination of jaded and idealistic, but remarkably acute as well. My second exemplary image appears in Luc Besson's *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* (1999). From the start of the film our sympathies and often our visual perspectives are aligned with the lass from Lorraine. She sees a good many terrifying things. As a child, she watches at close

³ See, Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Anamorphic Art*, trans. W. J. Strachan (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1976), 11-36.

quarters the rape and murder of a beloved sister. She also sees miraculous visions of a companionable savior grow increasingly violent and menacing as she herself grows up. Halfway through the film, Joan recounts the vision that has brought her to the court of Charles the Dauphin. A violent wind shatters a stained glass depiction of the Archangel Michael in the apse of a church. The fiery shards of glass float in slow motion and then the pieces of the image reassemble themselves in the air—a literal anamorphosis, then, an image formed again. God’s warrior angel has come down off the wall and assumed a terrifying aspect, calling Joan to lead a holy war against the English occupation of France. Chandler’s irreverent Marlowe had threatened to intrude upon the stained-glass scene and set things aright; in Besson’s anamorphosis the window explodes into the world.

Later, when Joan is taken prisoner, a second kind of perspectival shift occurs. Dustin Hoffman’s uncanny Monk visits her cell to insist that Joan’s visions were simply hallucinations, rather mundane occurrences twisted into evidence of a divine calling by an over-heated, presumptuous imagination. As he concludes: “You saw what you wanted to see.” The film, it seems, has taken advantage of our sympathies to play an agnostic trick on its audience. But then a third shift in perspectives forces us to change our minds yet again, further complicating the ontological status of what we’ve seen and what it means. Throughout the scenes in Joan’s prison cell we view Hoffman’s character from Joan’s perspective in point-of-view camera. When an objective camera pulls back from this intense encounter, we see Joan alone in her cell, pleading and remonstrating with empty space. This third anamorphic shift yields an objective perspective but it does so in order restore the enigmatic status of Joan’s subjectivity. If Hoffman’s Monk is only another manifestation of Joan intense interiority, then the doubts that he casts upon her visions are a part of, rather than a refutation of, her subjective experience.

Lacan believed that the more intense our investments in the interiority of the other, the more likely it is that desire will skew our perception. Subjectivity is a function of misrecognition because the gaze of the other, which produces the subject and is interiorized within the self, remains a foreign, unstable thing. It’s not difficult to see why anamorphosis fascinated Lacan. The seventh and eleventh seminars explore anamorphosis in great detail, employing examples from medieval love lyric and early-modern painting to mark moments when the illusory character of sublimation first becomes represented.⁴ Lacan’s work on anamorphosis is thus an unrecognized contribution to the *ut pictura poesis* tradition. Poetry holds a mirror up to subjectivization, a revolution that painting finally illustrates nearly four centuries later. Troubadour and Trouvère poetry in Lacan’s reading invents courtly love through a thorough-going distortion of actual relationships between men and women.

⁴ See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960, Book VII*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992) and Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, Book XI*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981).

Such sublimations need not be idealizing, however, as Lacan's scatological example from Arnaut Daniel makes abundantly clear. But whether the result of sublimation is Dante's Beatrice or the anal trumpet of Daniel's Lady Ena, the structure of desire remains the same: an empty core, an object articulated around that core, which in turn provokes the sublimation of desire.⁵ In fact, parodies of the romantic sublime, such as that by Arnaut Daniel or the misdirected kiss in Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale," expose the sadomasochistic kernel that structures courtly desire. Such parodies yield anamorphic glimpses of the Real lurking within the Imaginary.

When Lacan turns to painterly anamorphoses he relies much more explicitly on an epistemic rupture between medieval and modern. In recovering three-point perspective, Renaissance architects, sculptors, painters, and gadget-makers invested deeply in the reproduction of visible reality through things like optics and geometry. It didn't take long, however, for the appearance of depth in painting or foreshortening in architecture to be recognized as perspectival illusions, the artificiality of which might be laid bare through anamorphic distortions. What Lacan calls the "sinister truth" of Holbein's *Ambassadors* is latent in the phallic stain at the bottom of the canvas.⁶ Moving from the front of the canvas to a nearly 90-degree angle on the left causes the stain to be rectified, assuming the form of a three-dimensional skull. Death haunts an apparently self-possessed image of the pride of life just as disruptively as Alisoun's "nether eye" does Absolom's erotic desire. Philip Marlowe's comment on "stained glass romance" works in similar ways. He identifies a detail that seems to expose an erotic energy hidden in the chivalric image, an energy that has nothing at all to do with releasing the woman from her bonds. His diction leaves ambiguous just what exactly he hopes to accomplish by entering the picture himself: "sooner or later (I'd) have to climb up there and help him. He didn't seem to be really trying." Does Marlowe want to help the woman, or does he want to join the knight in taking advantage of her situation?

Anamorphosis begins to look like the figure *par excellence* for the Lacanian unconscious, a plastic counterpart to his famous dictum that the "unconscious is structured like a language." Following his chief source in *Anamorphic Art* by Jurgis Balthusaitis, Lacan is keen to draw a parallel between perspective in painting and Descartes' contemporaneous development of the *cogito*.⁷ As an historical account of the relationship between perspective and epistemology, such notions have been carefully vetted by recent scholars, such as Lyle Massey and James Elkins. These art historians find not a single, uniform theory of perspective in the early-modern period but rather a congeries of approaches. Yet, as Elkins realizes, perspective and its evil twin, anamorphosis, are "at the heart of a vast intellectual and moral project."⁸

⁵ For Lacan's discussion of "Courtly Love as Anamorphosis," see *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 139-54.

⁶ Lacan, *Ethics*, 140.

⁷ Lacan, *Ethics*, 103.

⁸ James Elkins, *The Poetics of Perspective* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994), 3. See also, Lyle Massey, *Picturing Space, Displacing Bodies: Anamorphosis in Early Modern Theories of Perspective* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007).

Two related propositions spring from this, I think. First, the development of three-point perspective in painting constructs what one scholar calls a “period eye,” and as such is deeply implicated in historiographical narratives of a temporal rupture between medieval and early-modern cultures.⁹ As Edgerton remarks: “only by 1480 or so did *perspectiva*... assume its now familiar meaning, and was so defined by Christoforo Landino, Leonardo Da Vinci, and Piero delle Francesca.”¹⁰ My second proposition follows directly from this: the idea of distortions dispelled by rectified perspectives is homologous with the Renaissance invention of the Middle Ages. For early-modern classicists, medieval scholasticism had progressively skewed our knowledge of ancient learning, an accumulation of error that could only be rectified through direct engagements with original manuscripts and artifacts. For the reformed churches, Roman Catholicism had distorted the primitive church in similar ways, especially in the investiture of images and ceremonies with a divine power that from a reformed perspective came to seem one with the conjuring of illusions.

This paper has, I hope, demonstrated something of the inter-implication of medievalism and anamorphosis. I want to close by outlining a few of the ways that anamorphic perspectives might serve as a theoretical model. Panofsky was perhaps the first to insist that varieties of perspective in painting embody ways of seeing integral to the cultures that invented them. There is a great deal of historical justification for putting the development of three-point perspective and its grotesque offspring, anamorphosis, at the center of a theoretical account of medievalism. The same period that invented the Middle Ages and medievalism also invented the illusions of three-dimensional space and “curious perspectives.” I believe that anamorphosis, along with related discourses on perspective, the gaze, and the uncanny can be integrated to construct a powerful critical apparatus. Seeing the uncanny emergence of the medieval within the modern defines a line of sight, a point of view, and yields a legible, relevant image. Seeing the modern within the medieval constitutes a search for origins, surely, but it also leaves its stain on the past—like Chandler’s Marlowe who discovers both an ancestor and some rather shady sexual preferences in the example of St. George. Likewise, Besson’s film teaches a master class on the incongruity of medieval and contemporary perspectives only to reinstate the coherence of spiritual life on the other side of postmodern undecidability. In so far as we can situate a perspective by working backwards from what it allows us to “see” in the past, we can determine why any particular detail sticks out for a particular artist or audience. The illusions about the Middle Ages that emerge are not conjured out of thin air, rather they are a function of perspective, which lends them recognizable forms and shapes.

⁹ The term “period eye” was coined by Michael Baxandall in *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972, 1988), 29.

¹⁰ Samuel Y. Edgerton, *The Mirror, the Window, and the Telescope: How Renaissance Linear Perspective Changed Our View of the Universe* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2009), 41.