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Spectacle and Cyclicality in *The Green Knight*

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Medieval films are necessarily concerned with spectacle.[1] Angela Jane Weisl's chapter on "Spectacle" in *Medievalism*: *Key Critical Terms* describes the "medieval notion of spectacle as a kind of exotic performance" which carries "into the present; much medievalism, intentional or accidental, takes the form of a spectacle, a creation to be both observed and experienced."[2] There are a few moments within the narrative of David Lowery's *The Green Knight*[3] that we could understand in terms of this performative meaning of spectacle: the beheading game with the Green Knight where the knights of the round table and the king and queen look on; or the wedding of Gawain to the young queen, whose makeup and costume present a *Star Wars*-esque spectacle, and where many extras stand by to observe. Aside from these moments, though, the bulk of *The Green Knight* runtime is just Gawain alone with the scenery, or speaking privately with only one other person, so the theory of spectacle might otherwise seem to have minimal relevance here. But even these scenes are hardly devoid of spectacle: there are long shots of gorgeous wastes turned on their heads, meandering giantesses, red-tinted pools with skulls in them, smoldering battlefields, and green chapels overgrown with lush vegetation. These are certainly spectacles for the modern audience, the viewer of the film. In these moments of extended focus on one character alone, however, the audience's engagement is absorbed until their role as spectator collapses into the diegesis of the film. It is easy for the audience, having become so immersed in the narrative, to forget they are a spectator, forget that they are watching a film at all.

In a few key scenes, Lowery uses unorthodox camera movement to force the viewer out of complacency and remind them that they are viewing a film, re-engaging the audience in the experience of spectacle even when Gawain is alone onscreen. The camerawork has as much, if not more, of a role here than CGI, scenery, or circumstance: I argue that Lowery's choice to use long pans in a complete circle force the film-viewing audience to consider their perspective and role as viewer of the film in critical moments of narrative ambiguity. Two moments in the film use these extended panoramic shots which, I argue, not only engage the viewer more actively in meaning-making of the film's narrative and

[1] As Angela Weisl quotes from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, spectacles are, by their very natures, "'specially prepared or arranged display[s] of a more or less public nature.'" She then argues for the consideration of medievalist spectacles in terms of their illusory recreation of the Middle Ages, which itself becomes a spectacle. See "Spectacle," in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, ed. Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 2014), 231-8, 231.

[2] Weisl, "Spectacle," 231.

[3] *The Green Knight*, directed by David Lowery (A24, 2021).

the nature of its cyclicality, but also activate the circle motif crucial to the plot and symbolism of the film and the poem, prompting a re-view or at least re-consideration of the film that continues the circuit of retelling.

Though those familiar with the medieval poem will expect the girdle as an important circular symbol, the figure of the complete circle is introduced much earlier—and not by the round table, which is, in this adaptation, a C-shaped, incomplete circle. Instead, it is sometime in the "Too Quick Year" between when Gawain has beheaded the Green Knight and pledged to return but has not yet left his uncle's court, when Gawain views another spectacle: the puppet show miming his beheading of the Green Knight.[4] Though anachronistically in the style of seventeenth century *commedia dell'arte*,[5] the puppet show nevertheless contains a key medieval feature: the *rota fortunae* or wheel of fortune creaking creepily behind the macabre pantomime of a beheading.[6] This wheel, this circle, arrests the attention of the viewers of the play within a play and the viewers of the film, presenting a spectacle of the cycle of life and death, of the past and, importantly, of the possible future. Instead of figuring prominently in the spectacle, Gawain spectates, watching as a puppet representation of himself wanders the stage in his signature yellow cloak. Puppet Gawain encounters the puppet Green Knight and, without a second thought, beheads him, to soft gasps from the crowd of children in the audience. The beheaded Green Knight then picks up his head and both puppets leave the stage, allowing for an extended shot of the wheel of fortune turning. Here, the puppet adventure is intercut by almost eight minutes of material: first Gawain and Essel in bed describing the beheading, combined with brief flashbacks of the puppet scene;[7] then Gawain in a pub being asked, in a callback to the poem, "You're Gawain, aren't you?," before getting

[4] *The Green Knight*, 0:25:26.

[5] The style and heightened violence played for amusement evokes the "Punch and Judy" shows, themselves derived from Italian *commedia dell'arte* characters. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* claims that by "1700 practically every puppet show in England featured Punch, and his wife, Judy, originally called Joan, was also a well-known figure." So, though anachronistic for a poem composed in the late-fourteenth century, the film evokes this popular Early Modern artistic medium, and lends it a more medieval element, the wheel of fortune. See Richard Pallardy, "Punch (puppet character)," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last modified December 7, 2023, accessed September 10, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Punch-puppet-character.

[6] Originating in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, the Wheel of Fortune was a popular medieval icon featuring female Fortuna spinning a wheel representing the fortunes of man: first rising, then sitting at the pinnacle of the rotation on a throne, falling, and finally crushed beneath the wheel. See Richard Leighton Greene, "Fortune," *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, vol. 3, ed. Joseph R. Strayer (New York: Scribner's, 1983), 145-7. For more on the Arthurian connection to the *rota fortunae*, see Audrey Martin and David Mason, "Arthur Among the Nine Worthies," in *The Arthurian World*, ed. Victoria Coldham-Fussell, Miriam Edlich-Muth, Renée Ward (New York: Routledge, 2022), 43-68.

[7] *The Green Knight*, 0:26:02.

into a fight over an insult to his mother;[8] and a conversation with the king about his past and his future greatness.[9] Finally, the scene fades out and returns to the puppet show's wheel of fortune, which concludes its rotation to falling snow, indicating a passage of time and season.[10] Puppet Gawain is next summarily beheaded, to nervous reactions from the audience. The puppet show not only features the rotating wheel of fortune and introduces the circle motif, but it also establishes a pattern of returning the viewer to a moment in Gawain's past and looking to his future.

As Weisl argues, "the past cannot be resurrected; it can only be represented;" therefore, "all roles (including spectating) within a representation are performances as they act outside of the real, in a created time and space which can connect present and past, time and timelessness, the transcendent moment of theatre and of transcendence."[11] Like the film that the audience views, the puppet show demonstrates that spectacles of the past are by their very nature cyclical. But by introducing a possible projection of the future as well, on the heels of the wheel of fortune spinning in a circle, the film also casts the spectacle forward, so that the present—including the extended intercut of nonlinear material that primes the viewer for the "alternate future" segments to come—becomes a narrative point we must return to before the film can proceed. The puppet show, visualizing past, present and future through the use of the rotating wheel of fortune, does not merely foreshadow Gawain's fate, but also references a guiding theme of cyclicality in his narrative.

It is not until the first of two panorama shots in the film that the audience is directly drawn into this theme. For the puppet show, the viewer has stand-ins for themselves in the viewers of the puppet show, but in the panorama shots, the modern audience member becomes aware that they are the only one viewing this perspective. The camerawork's full-circle panorama at two key moments recalls the wheel of fortune, a 360-degree rotation through Gawain's possible endings. As the wheel of fortune shows Gawain's possible future to both the internal and external audiences, so too do the panoramic shots show Gawain first as a skeleton and then as an honorless king to the viewers of the film. The abrupt ending of the film, before we see Gawain beheaded, turns spectacle into speculation, leaving the audience perpetually cycling through Gawain's possible futures.

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[8] *The Green Knight*, 0:27:50. Compare "'Þou art not Gawayn,' quoþ þe gome, 'þat is so goud halden, / Þat neuer arȝed for no here by hylle ne be vale'" ["'You are not Gawain,' said the man, 'who is held so good, who never feared any army on hill or in valley'"] in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 2nd ed., ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, rev. Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), Fitt 4, lines 2270-1.
[9] *The Green Knight*, 0:28:57.
[10] *The Green Knight*, 0:32:27.
[11] Weisl, "Spectacle," 232.

Film and media scholars have characterized the panorama, from its role as static art to its function in film, as giving the viewer varying levels of greater control over scenery than images with less mobile scope. In panoramic paintings, according to Erkki Huhtamo, the spectator has "scopic-ambulatory mastery over the surrounding scenery."[12] In the panorama historically, however, the viewer's "visions were by no means unfettered; they were crafted by commercial and ideological concerns lurking behind the apparently limitless canvas."[13] Warren Buckland, in recasting Tom Gunning's theory of the panorama, describes the form as a way to "explore space."[14] Panoramas, either mechanical or cinematic, "simulate reality," according to Angela Miller, though "such a 'reality effect'" only occurs once the viewer willfully suspends their disbelief. Importantly, any "act of will, however, was succeeded by a period of rapt absorption in the spectacle."[15] In short, therefore, the panorama is a visual effect that requires an act of the viewer's will to reject the spectacle and exert intention over the meaning of the piece. The tension between the viewer's intention and the spectacle presented to them makes the panorama viewer a "deeply unstable subject," according to Christa Blümlinger, and "discontinuity, shock, and suggestibility characterize the experience" of constant withdrawal of scenery and introduction of new scenery.[16] The panorama ultimately gives the audience more agency over the image, but also destabilizes the audience, reminding them that they are not merely a passive viewer but an active participant in viewing the media in question.

Scott Combs situates the panoramic shot's role in the history of the "death scene" in American cinema.[17] And while Combs uses the early films of D. W. Griffiths to make his argument, continued utilization of panorama in death scenes shows a throughline from his films to today. *The Green Knight*'s panoramic shots both feature the "death" of Gawain presented as spectacle to the audience. Of course, Gawain does not really die in either panorama, but the audience is left reflecting on a representation of his corpse and the ever-present possibility of his death. Focusing on what Scott Simmon refers to as "Griffith's 'death-haunted pan'" which "belongs to the larger tradition of registering death for spectator knowledge," Combs argues that "[o]nly the spectator has eyes for this image, so its repetition nearly directly addresses his or her own experience of the film—it

[12] Erkki Huhtamo, *Illusions in Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013), 6.

[13] Huhtamo, *Illusions in Motion*, 6.

[14] Warren Buckland, "A Rational Reconstruction of 'The Cinema of Attractions,'" in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 41–56, 43.

[15] Angela Miller, "The Panorama, the Cinema, and the Emergence of the Spectacular," *Wide Angle* 18, no. 2 (1996): 34-69, 40.

[16] Christa Blümlinger makes these comments in her use of Lynne Kirby when comparing the train passenger with the cinema viewer. See, "Lumière, the Train and the Avant-Garde," in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 245-64, 247.

[17] Scott Combs, "Mobile Endings: Screen Death, Early Narrative, and the Films of D. W. Griffith," *Cinema Journal*, 52, no. 1 (2012): 90–106.

emanates from outside the place-holding bodies."[18] So, too, do the extended panorama shots in *The Green Knight*, and the repetition inherent in a single shot that pans around and returns to the first image, forces the audience to address their individual experience of Gawain's death. Combs continues: "[o]n the one hand, the circle intimates repetition and transcendence; on the other hand, the pan shows the mark death makes in the diegesis."[19] I take from this two claims that are relevant to the first panorama in *The Green Knight*: the role of the spectator of the panorama shot (the audience) as singularly crucial to the diegesis of the narrative, and the circular function of the panorama shot as a way for the film to explore and the audience to consider repetition, transcendence, and death.

The first panorama of the film occurs after Gawain has been captured by scavengers, bound and gagged and left to observe the thieves going through his packs. When they flee in a fight over the goods, they leave Gawain alone in the forest. The panorama begins with a shot of Gawain lying as he was left, perhaps having given up, before turning 360 degrees to the right through a long, slow shot of the forest lasting nearly a full minute.[20] Upon returning to where the viewer left Gawain, the camera now zooms in on a decomposed skeleton, presumably the rotted remains of a Gawain who was left here to die. The grass around the base of the tree is greener, indicating a passage of some time. After the zoom in on the skeleton, the camera pans back around, to the left this time, in another minute-long pan that returns the scene back to winter, and to Gawain, alive and determined to escape his bonds and live.[21] Following on the heels of the dynamic panorama, which is already engaging the audience, and the image of the desiccated remains of Gawain, the spectator is acutely aware of themselves in this moment, uncomfortably aware of their "own experience of the film," since they temporarily are left without even a protagonist. Because Gawain is alone in this panorama shot, viewers are forced, in the long minutes of silence and scenery, to think about their perspectives.[22] The audience must speculate if Gawain is actually dead, and, if he is, what it means for the narrative. As the viewer spins, they are invited to contemplate the cyclicality of death and life, winter and spring, present and (possible) future. Combs also points out the role of "[r]eturning to the original shot" in raising "a surfeit of possible meanings."[23] The spinning viewer perspective, which in *The Green Knight* is taken first to a possible version of the shot before returning to the original shot and timeline, forces the audience to actively participate in consideration of those possibilities. When the viewer finds that Gawain is

[18] Combs, "Mobile Endings," 104. See also *The Country Doctor,* directed by D. W. Griffith (Biograph Studios, 1909), the primary film through which Combs analyzes the effects of a long pan.
[19] Combs, "Mobile Endings," 104.
[20] *The Green Knight*, 0:50:34-0:51:27.
[21] *The Green Knight*, 0:52:32.
[22] Needing to break the tension when I saw this in theaters, I leaned over to my sister and whispered, "Well, that was a short movie," when Gawain's corpse appeared merely 50 minutes into the film.
[23] Combs, "Mobile Endings," 102.

not actually dead in the narrative of the story, they are still haunted by his death, still forced to consider it as a possibility, and his death remains a specter, something audience members may mentally return to, as they continue viewing the film.[24]

In the second panorama, the audience can no longer be passive viewers merely speculating on Gawain's future: the audience has time, now, to contemplate all of what has just occurred in the preceding scenes, which function both as the past and as a possible future for young Gawain. After confronting the Green Knight, Gawain first flinches from the blow, and then flees outright, giving up the quest, returning home, and inheriting the kingdom from the King. The audience's opinion of Gawain has maybe soured at this point, since he does not fully live up to the role of Gawain in the poem or of any traditional hero. He dishonors himself with the girdle and the Green Knight quest, abandons the Lord and the Lady Bertilak, ruins Essel and marries a new Young Queen, sees his son killed in a war, and dies hiding in his throne room, eventually abandoned by his wife, child, and his mother. The panorama shot here is only one slow circle to the left, showing a crumbling castle, running soldiers, and an invasion underway.[25] It re-engages the audience with the narrative, forcing the viewer to contemplate the preceding scenarios while Gawain's life literally crumbles around him.

When Gawain removes the magic belt and his head falls off, the audience is led to conjecture, at least upon a first viewing, that Gawain was in fact "dead all along" and the magic green belt was all that held his head on his body through his years of dishonor.[26] But upon continuing the film, where the scene returns young Gawain to the Green Chapel where he has yet to be beheaded or flee his quest, the audience is forced to reflect upon new possible meanings: was that entire digression a glimpse of the future—and if so, is it guaranteed, or only one potential outcome? Gawain even asks the Green Knight "Is this really all there is?"[27] Although Lowery considers the ending to be unambiguous, indicating an ending where the beheading of Gawain *is* "all there is"—and an honorable death being the *preferable* option—the pattern established by the first panorama muddies the waters.[28] The reversal of Gawain's possible death at the hands of scavengers in the first panoramic shot further impacts the second panorama scene, and therefore the conclusion of the entire film: if Gawain gets a do-over once and lives, it asks, why could he not get a second chance again at the end? And, for those audience members who

[24] The viewer may feel like Superman, having spun around the earth fast enough to time travel to a point before the death of Lois Lane. See *Superman*, directed by Richard Donner (Warner Bros., 1978), 2:11:02.
[25] *The Green Knight*, 2:00:51-2:01:35.
[26] *The Green Knight*, 2:02:41.
[27] *The Green Knight*, 1:47:08.
[28] "It's not ambiguous so much as it's a little bit beneath the surface, ready to be drawn up. It ends exactly as it was scripted," Lowery says in a Reddit AMA. See Jeremy Mathai, "'The Green Knight' Director David Lowery Talks About That Ending," */Film*, August 8, 2021, https://www.slashfilm.com/583570/the-green-knight-director-david-lowery-talks-about-that-ending/.

remain until the post-credits scene, where a little girl (Gawain's daughter?) picks up his crown from the throne room floor,[29] further confusion now exists: at which point *does* he die, exactly? The audience is invited and even required to participate in making sense of the story, the story that will ultimately conclude without traditional resolution, before the question of whether Gawain survives his encounter with the Green Knight or not is answered. The director's camerawork, therefore, brings the viewing audience into the sense of spectacle, not as passive viewers but as an audience required to speculate, not just spectate, on the polysemy of the film.

As Weisl concludes, "Medievalist spectacles" are "an invention of the past as an antidote to a fragmented and unstable reality."[30] But, in the case of *The Green Knight,* the incredibly modern and dynamic panorama shot destabilizes the audience's view of the past through their "participation" in the medievalist narrative. The resulting polysemic interpretations of a film that is anything but straightforward yield a narrative that is specifically cyclical, returning the viewer to fracture points of narrative coherence and recalling the very panoramas that instigate them. The cyclicality of the narrative's polysemy echoes the motif of the circle presented throughout the film—and the poem. The panoramic shot becomes representative of and even recalls the wheel of fortune shown in the puppet show, the circular crown on Gawain's head, the circle of the green belt, and, ultimately, a circling back to the medieval poem.

[29] *The Green Knight*, 2:08:57.
[30] Weisl, "Spectacle," 238.