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Remediating Chivalry: Political Aesthetics and the Round Table

Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman

Moving between Edwin Austin Abbey's 1901 series of murals "The Quest of the Holy Grail" and images of the Round Table from other media, including a late fourteenth-century copy of Wirnt von Gravenberg's Arthurian romance *Wigalois* (Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, ms. Ltk. 537) and John Boorman's 1981 film *Excalibur*, this essay considers representations of the Round Table as a means of charting the ascendancy of the visual over the discursive in political representation during the twentieth century. The images we examine – a painting, a manuscript illumination, and a film shot – register, in a single glance at the Round Table, ideologies of hierarchy, power, and submission to authority that by the middle of the European twentieth century turn particularly dark, reaching their apotheosis in the Nazi state.

At the conclusion of the nineteenth century, artist, illustrator, and painter Edwin Austin Abbey, an American who spent most of his adult life in England, painted a series of murals for the Document Delivery Room of the new Boston Public Library. Commissioned in 1890, the series, entitled "The Quest of the Holy Grail," was completed in 1901. While Abbey drew upon the popularity of grail legends recounted in both Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* and Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, literary texts that had increasingly been used to inspire patriotism in the nineteenth century, he takes enormous liberties with his many textual sources, appropriating them to offer a vision of the Arthurian legend appropriate to what Sylvester Baxter called that "great Library, which stands as a visible expression of the mind and soul of Boston,"

one of the birthplaces of American exceptionalism (13).[1] We begin our analysis of the intermediality of the Round Table by invoking Abbey's work for the Boston Public Library, in particular his vision of the Round Table in the third panel of the sequence.[2] This panel recounts the story of Galahad's ascension to the Siege Perilous;[3] it is the only reference to King Arthur or the Knights of the Round Table in the entire series. Abbey's vision of King Arthur's Round Table might seem, at first blush, idiosyncratic, an American Anglophile's nostalgic retreat from a troubling modernity into a more authoritarian and appealing medieval past. But a closer look will reveal the ways in which Abbey's project resonates with ideas about chivalry that circulated, not only in Abbey's expatriate circle, but throughout American popular culture at the turn of the century.[4]

Moving between Abbey's mural and images of the Round Table from other media, this essay examines visual representations of the Round Table as a means of charting the ascendancy of the visual over the discursive in political representation during the twentieth century. The images we examine – a film shot, a manuscript illumination, and a painting – register, in a single glance at the Round Table, ideologies of hierarchy, power, and submission to authority that, by the middle of the European twentieth century, turn particularly dark, reaching their apotheosis in the Nazi state. As such, this essay is a study of the politics of "remediation," a term coined by Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin to describe not only the "formal logic by which new media refashion prior media" (273), but also the ways in which that refashioning revises older media, drastically changing our perceptions of older media. "What is new about new media," they argue, "comes from the particular ways in

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[1] As Henry James notes, Abbey "arranged his own sequence of adventures to suit the exigencies of pictorial treatment, drawing now from one source, now from another, but chiefly from Robert de Borron, Chrétien de Troyes, Wolfram von Eschenbach and Walter Map" (*The Quest of the Holy Grail* 4 [unnumbered]). Abbey's literary and artistic sources are discussed briefly by Hirschler (38 and 40) and in detail by Jarman (146-72).

[2] On "intermediality" see Wolf, especially 35-47.

[3] Abbey notes: "In some form of the [Grail] legends Galahad is the hero, in others Perceval or Parzival, but for the sake of keeping the story as simple as possible, I make Galahad, the blameless knight, the central figure in all my designs" ("Preliminary Outline for the Grail Cycle" [c. 1892], rpt. in Jarman 231). For another discussion of this panel, see Jarman 188-213.

[4] Americans who formed part of Abbey's circle of friends in England included the painters John Singer Sargent and James Whistler, both of whom also received commissions from the library (although Whistler's was never completed), as well as Francis Millet and the writer Henry James (see Kenin 106-29).

which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media" (15). Our argument in this essay is not a historical one, at least not in the conventional sense of a progress narrative that understands time as moving in one direction. We do not read the relationships of the different media we examine as a constant striving for, and achievement of, more and better realism, for representations that "remedy" older ones by more effectively capturing the "real" object; that is only part of the story. Remediation, as Bolter and Grusin describe it, involves a double logic by which new media oscillate between immediacy and what they call "hypermediacy," the tendency of media to call attention to their status as media: "Although each medium promises to reform its predecessors by offering a more immediate or more authentic experience, the promise of reform inevitably leads us to become aware of the new medium as a medium" (19). This process, they argue, has "expressed itself repeatedly in the genealogy of Western representation" (56). Thus we demonstrate how mediatized events in the present challenge common sense notions of historical narrative. We read backward and forward between the different media describing struggles to appropriate the image of the Round Table for particular political ends.

The Round Table in this essay functions as an empty signifier that can be appropriated and filled with particular ideological and cultural meanings. In particular, we are interested in the ways in which the media themselves (the book, the canvas, the filmic apparatus) organize the act of gazing such that point of view (the space allotted in the image for the viewer) functions as the *point de caption* or quilting point that Slavoj Zizek argues binds together and organizes ideologies, in this case ideologies of nationalism and masculinity (*Sublime Object* 87). Point of view, we argue, organizes hypermasculine aggression into a militarized space under the sway of a powerful and charismatic leader. We focus in this project on the mechanisms by which visual incarnations of the Round Table in different media create the desire for inclusion in this militarized space. The mechanisms for looking deployed by each medium "interpellate," to use Althusser's term, a viewer – specifically a male viewer – who is called to desire membership in the homosocial fraternity of the Round Table (162, 165).

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Before turning to a closer examination of Abbey's image, we have space to offer only two examples of the process that we want to describe here, the process by which ideology is remediated through particular ways of looking. The first is a shot of the Round Table from John Boorman's 1981 film *Excalibur* (see Figure 1). This shot occurs at the end of a long tracking shot that has followed the film's Fair Unknown and Grail knight, Perceval, into and around Arthur's court as he gawks at its wonders. It culminates in Perceval standing in a gallery looking down upon Arthur and his knights assembling at the Round Table. The crane shot represents Perceval's first glimpse of the Table and it happens to be looking down from a great height.

The camera locates the viewer in Perceval's point of view by showing the back of Perceval's head, while he says, "I must be dreaming." But as he leaves the shot, the camera lingers for a moment on the scene and the audience enjoys a panoptical glimpse of the Round Table with knights in gleaming metal armor surrounding it. The effect dissolves the humanity of the knights into a geometric form surprisingly reminiscent of the crane shots in a Busby Berkeley musical. This shot completes the apotheosis of King Arthur into a charismatic, if not messianic, leader and inspires in the viewer awe and desire (aided, no doubt, by the Wagnerian theme from "Siegfried's Funeral March" playing in the soundtrack). This is the point of view we are tracking in this project – visual depictions of the Round Table from the Middle Ages onward viewed from above, from what, in film, would be called a "crane shot." [5]

Shots like this one create a particular fantasy of political omnipotence, what Susan Sontag and Paul Gilroy (among others) have called a "fascist aesthetic," a style that "recasts the political as a realm of the beautiful so as to compensate for the costs of modern disenchantment" (Koepnick 1).

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[5] We have discovered versions of this crane shot image of the Round Table in films as various as *Knights of the Round Table* (1953), *Prince Valiant* (1954), *The Adventures of Sir Lancelot* (TV series 1956), *Camelot* (1967) and even Youssef Chahine's 1963 Egyptian film *Saladin*. It appears in interestingly mutated (and muted) forms in Robert Bresson's *Lancelot du Lac* (1974) and Hans Jürgen Syberberg's *Parsifal* (1983). We have even discovered a remediated version of this image in the architectural improvements Himmler made to his SS stronghold in Wewelsburg Castle.

Figure 1: Screenshot from *Excalibur*, 1981 film by John Boorman, reproduced here solely for the purpose of critical analysis.

The attraction of the "fascist aesthetic" resides, as Sontag notes, in its idealism: "the ideal of life as art, the cult of beauty, the fetishism of courage, the dissolution of alienation in ecstatic feelings of community; the repudiation of the intellect; the family of man (under the parenthood of leaders)" (Sontag 96). Its power derives from its ability to "suture disenfranchised individuals into an all-encompassing spectacle of homogenization, an aesthetic simulation of community" (Koepnick 1). The fascist aesthetic takes on characteristic forms that have become all too familiar to us: "relations of domination and enslavement take the form of characteristic pageantry: the massing of groups of people; the turning of people into things; the multiplication or replication of things; the grouping of people/things around an all-powerful, hypnotic leader-figure or force." It is not hard to read into Boorman's shot references to the visual conventions of contemporary science fiction films that represent vast but methodically displayed masses of identical cyborgs or "metalized bodies." In films like *Star Wars* or *Starship Trooper*, in the Cybermen of *Dr. Who* or the Borg of the *Star Trek* franchise, we are presented with hybrid human-robots from whom all traces of humanity have been stripped, visual images that several commentators have connected to the monumental images of Nazi Party display in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*.

The fascist aesthetic, however, is not exactly the same thing as fascist politics. By invoking Riefenstahl, we are not arguing that Boorman is a fascist or that his film promotes fascist doctrines, any more than we will argue later that Abbey was fascist *avant la lettre*. Such an argument would not be terribly interesting, although we do believe that the appeal to archaic emotions and desires, to the pleasures of submission to authority, ought to give us pause wherever we find it. Our interest lies in the techniques for deploying the visual as a means of aestheticizing politics as a means of enhancing the prerogative power of the state. These techniques reach their apotheosis in the pageantry of fascist display (hence the term "fascist aesthetic), but they are not unique to it. As Sontag argues, "Such art is hardly confined to works labeled as fascist or produced under fascist governments. (To cite films only: Walt Disney's *Fantasia*, Busby Berkeley's *The Gang's All Here*, and Kubrick's *2001* also strikingly exemplify certain formal structures and themes of fascist art)" (91). This aesthetic also appears in the passage from Marinetti cited by Walter Benjamin in his epilogue to "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Marinetti writes:

> War is beautiful because it establishes man's dominion over the subjugated machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones, flame throwers, and small tanks. War is beautiful because it initiates the dreamt-of metalization of the human body. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns. War is beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease-fire, the scents, and the stench of putrefaction into a symphony. War is beautiful because it creates new architecture, like that of the big tanks, the geometrical formation flights, the smoke spirals from burning villages, and many others. (cited in Benjamin 241)

Marinetti's aestheticization of war, written in celebration of fascist Italy's aggression against Ethiopia, reflects sentiments that were already beginning to take form during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Italian Futurist manifestos, sentiments circulating in intellectual circles throughout Europe and the United States during the period when Abbey was installing his monumental panels at the Boston library. This passage suggests that techniques invoking hypermasculinity, violence, aggressive imperialism, and surrender to authority have had a long history in Western visual culture.

Let us push our crane shot a little further, then, turning back to the much older medium of medieval manuscript illumination. This illustration, from a late fourteenth-century copy of Wirnt von Gravenberg's Arthurian Romance *Wigalois* (Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, ms. Ltk. 537) illustrates the opening scene of the romance, a scene that emphasizes Arthur's custom never to sit down to eat before some kind of marvel or adventure has transpired (see Figure 2). No medium seems further removed in time and indeed in form from film, or from monumental public art, than manuscript illumination. The experience of viewing film or a mural like Abbey's is manifestly a public one and the scale of the images reflects that; many people can look at these media simultaneously in a cinema or other public building, such as a library, museum, gallery, or church.[6] The experience of viewing a manuscript, however, is an intensely private one. Only one person at a time can look at a book and illuminated manuscripts were usually commissioned by, and made for, a specific patron to be viewed privately; the *Wigalois* manuscript, for instance, was made for Duke Albrecht II von Braunschweig-Grubenhagen (Meuwese 30). Because it is designed for

[6] The recent proliferation of home viewing devices like VHS and DVD notwithstanding, film was created to be viewed in public theaters.

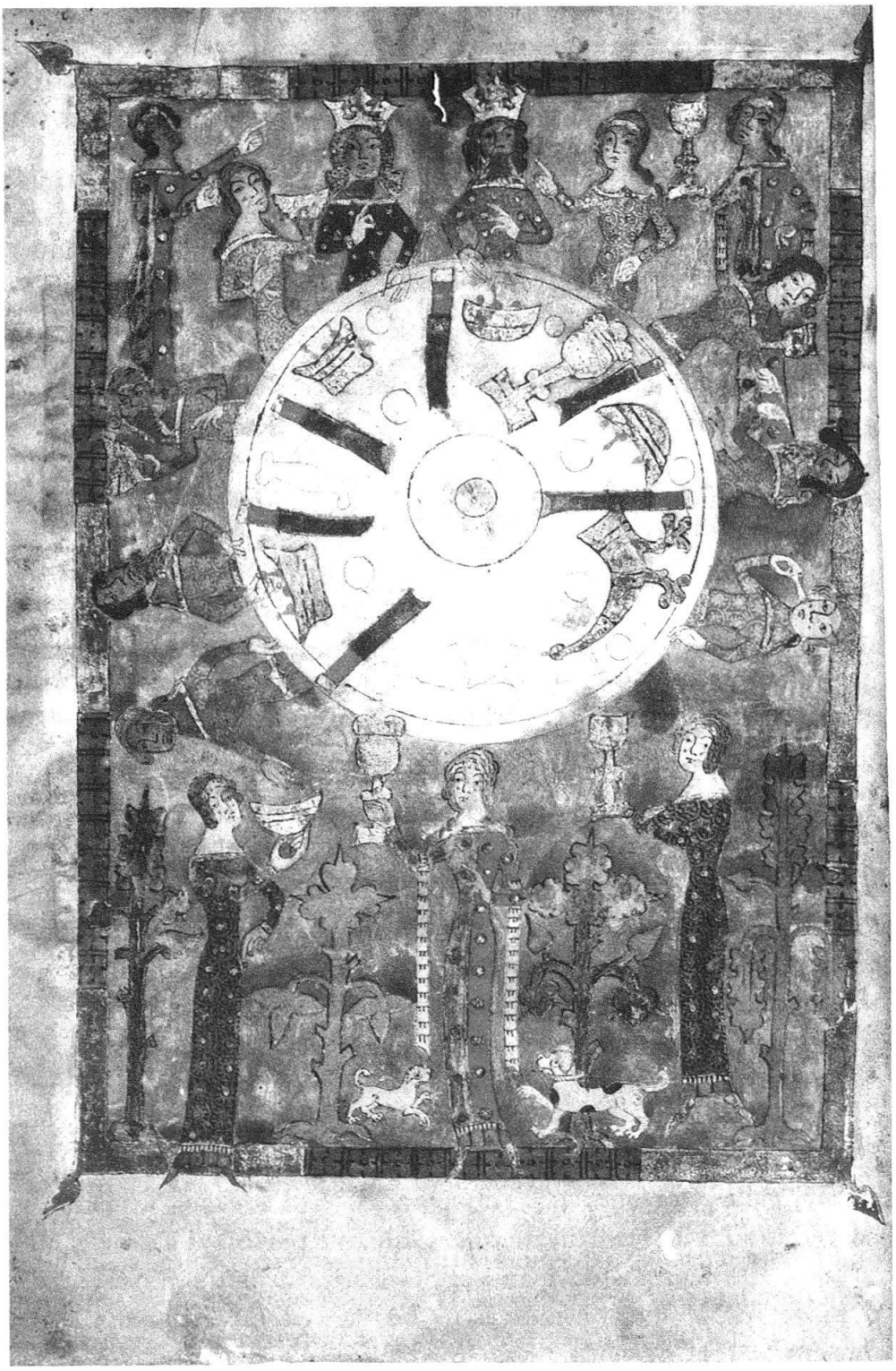

Figure 2: From *Wigalois*, Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, ms. Ltk. 537, reproduced with permission of Leiden University Library.

private viewing, the illuminated manuscript does not lend itself as well to the kinds of monumental displays that mark the fascist aesthetic. Its art is the art of the miniature. And yet the parallels between Boorman's film and this illumination are nonetheless intriguing. While we tend to think of film as a technology of mass media and manuscript illumination either as art or historical artifact, the two are united by the kinds of pleasures and anxieties they mobilize around representation and this mobilization of pleasure and anxieties through visual images will become central to the fascist aesthetic. As Fredric Jameson points out, the emergence of mass media (and particularly the multiplication of "new media" over the last few decades) has only made us more aware of the extent to which we have always been in media's grip: "We finally get it through our heads that culture . . . was always that [media], that the older forms or genres, . . . were also in their very different ways media products" (68). Illuminated manuscripts like this one both anticipate and provide inspiration for Boorman's cinematic fantasy. Each form, old and new, "remediates" – improves upon and remedies – the other and both exhibit the "double logic" of remediation. The technology of film supplements the illuminated manuscript with sound and movement, while enhancing the size and scope of display, as well as its "elasticity of scale" (Gilroy 150). The illumination's superior claim to immediacy is located in its claim to represent a "real" piece of the Middle Ages; in this, it surpasses the film's artificial "hyperreality."[7] Yet both media undercut this claim to transparency, calling attention to their own surfaces through their use of heterogeneous space, light, and geometric patterning. Marilynn Desmond and Pamela Sheingorn reveal the hypermediated form of the manuscript illumination when they describe fifteenth-century manuscript culture as "cinematic" in the ways in which it plays with the qualities of light, using it to interpellate – literally to call into being – a particular kind of spectator. The experience of viewing a manuscript illumination, they argue, "situates the reader as a spectator constructed by the luminous quality of the page. This aspect of the reading experience in late medieval manuscript culture is analogous to the modern cinematic experience" (2).

With its shifting perspective, the image from the *Wigalois* manuscript seems to position its viewers nowhere and everywhere at the same time, requiring the viewer to interact with the image in ways that would not be

[7] The term is Umberto Eco's.

all that unfamiliar to computer users. To understand how this image coherently interpellates its viewers, we must understand that, in manuscript illuminations, temporality can be rendered spatially. If, rather than trying to take the entire image in all at once, we read it as a sequence, its method for situating the viewer becomes clearer. We can, in fact, follow this image as we might a tracking shot in film by simply turning the book around, as medieval readers most likely did. The viewer is meant to focus first on the Round Table itself, shown from above as in the Boorman shot. The eye is drawn there because of its white space, punctuated by the geometric patterns created by the swords, and because of the light reflecting off the illuminated cups. The eye, then, tracks down to the three maidens below. From there, rotating the image ninety degrees left will focus the viewer's attention on the three figures on the right. A rotation ninety degrees to the right will then take us to the top where the crowned King and Queen are represented, then another rotation to the right brings us to the three figures on the left. The figure on the far left bottom of the table points back to the starting point and closes the circle, ending the tracking shot. In the manuscript, the reader must do the work of tracking (by rotating the image) that, in a film, the camera does through its movement (and through the illusion that the viewer moves with the camera).[8] Still, the medieval image manages an effect that, for us at least, is hypermediated by Boorman's filmic one. It turns the human figures into geometric patterns: note in particular the interlocking triangles created by the green and red dresses of three of the maidens (two at the top, one at the bottom) and the diaper patterned clothing connecting Arthur at the top and two maidens below.[9] The image's patterns all ultimately direct the viewer's attention to Arthur, situating him as the object of the viewer's desire, interpellating the viewer, such that Arthur's demand for a marvel becomes the viewer's demand as well.

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[8] In fact, a Powerpoint presentation could rotate the manuscript image, attempting to digitally replicate the action of a reader physically manipulating the book. One aspect of the hypermediacy Bolter and Grusin describe for the new media is the tendency to draw on techniques associated with older media like the book, see 31-34.

[9] We are grateful to our colleague, Sarah Blick, Associate Professor of Art History at Kenyon College, for her insightful observations on this image.

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How, then, do we trace the complex series of connections that link a manuscript illumination from the late Middle Ages to a nineteenth-century oil painting and a late twentieth-century film? How do we uncover the histories that connect the fascist aesthetic to older ideologies of hypermasculinity and visual display, such as chivalry? The remainder of this essay explores the ways in which contemporary images of the Round Table, like the one from *Excalibur,* "remediate" earlier images of the Round Table from the medieval manuscript illumination to Abbey's monumental and public murals. To do so, we must investigate "the process whereby the traditional fine arts are mediatized: that is, how they come to consciousness of themselves as various media within a mediatic system in which their own internal production also constitutes a symbolic message and the taking of a position on the status of the medium in question" (Jameson 62).

The link we want to make between Abbey and Boorman is Leni Riefenstahl, whose images of the Third Reich in *Triumph of the Will* (1934) have defined the way we think about fascism and whose visual aesthetic of monumentality, Sontag argues, not only "remediates" virtually all contemporary forms of political display, whatever their specific politics, but also requires that we rethink earlier aesthetic projects (in much the same way that we have had to rethink artists like Wagner). One invokes fascism these days, however, with some trepidation. As Michel Foucault, Slavoj Zizek, and Paul Gilroy have all pointed out, the term has been overused and even abused, emptied of signification by being invoked as a term of general abuse whose only function is denunciation. The term has been "corrupted by the way it has been used to express a sense of evil that is frustratingly abstract, but that remains hostage to fashionable contemporary fascination with obscenity, criminality, aggression, and horror" (Gilroy 145). We are using the term more precisely to unpack, in several visual images, the complex ideology in fascism that quilts together masculinity, violence, desire, and visuality, an ideology that remains part of the visual culture of politics despite fascism's discrediting. Fascism, as Gilroy, Theweleit, and many others have pointed out, creates a masculinized public sphere in which warfare becomes "a space in which men can know themselves better and love one another legitimately in the absence of the feminine" (Gilroy 146). In doing so it draws upon currents that have very deep roots in Western

culture and which may indeed suggest one of the attractions of medieval chivalry, even in a country like the United States which was founded upon a rejection of the ideology of aristocratic hierarchy.

Visual culture was given a privileged place in the constitution of the fascist public sphere (Gilroy 150).[10] Technological innovations in the field of visual culture were central to the rise of fascist movements (149) that resulted in an aestheticization of politics and concomitant politicization of aesthetics, both of which continued unabated even in the absence of specific fascist political doctrines. As Gilroy argues, the fascist aesthetic "lives on and exerts a powerful pull that can be all the more seductive in situations where the ideology is neither known nor enthused over. In such settings, it becomes possible to separate the uniforms, boots, fires, banners, columns of light, orchestrated crowds, and perfect bodies" (147) from discredited ideologies. In his study of the German reception of Boorman's film, Ray Wakefield describes "how Boorman's aesthetic choices came to be rejected on political grounds by German audiences who found in the valorization of a charismatic leader of mythical proportions unacceptable reminders of their own recent and troubled history" (166). He argues that German audiences read the film through the aesthetics established by Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* and Klaus Theweleit's two-volume study of Nazi masculinity, *Male Fantasies*, which appeared in 1978, only a few years before the film. And indeed there is much in the film – from Boorman's use of Wagner's music to his invocation of Jungian archetypes – to support the reading of *Excalibur* through a fascist aesthetic.

The best way to explore how Riefenstahl's images remediate political imagery both today and in the past is through the sequence that perhaps most famously displays the features Sontag associates with the fascist aesthetic. Midway through *Triumph of the Will*, Riefenstahl films a rally commemorating the death of Field Marshal von Hindenburg. This sequence evinces the "double logic of remediation." On the one hand, the director insists on the immediacy of her images. In an interview in *Cahiers du Cinema*, Riefenstahl claimed, "you will notice if you see the film today that it doesn't contain a single reconstructed scene. Everything is real. . . . It is history," even though there has always been speculation

[10] We are aware that monumental forms of political display such as those created by Riefenstahl and Speer have not always been effective, even in Nazi Germany. For a discussion of sites of aesthetic tension in the fascist state, see Koepnick, especially 187-212.

that these performances were staged for the film. On the other hand, the film insistently calls attention to its hypermediacy, to its own stylization, its status as mediated image through "the massing of groups of people; the turning of people into things; the multiplication or replication of things" (Sontag 91), binding the "herd-like masses" together through the technology of the camera. There is one moment in particular that calls our attention specifically to the technological apparatus by which the viewer is interpellated into this fascist fantasy. Following one of the crane shots showing thousands of troops marching in review, creating patterns that subsume the masses' humanity into geometric patterns in ceaseless motion, there is a countershot. In it, the attentive viewer can just make out the crane onto which the camera has been mounted as it rises up on a column supporting the immense swastika-emblazoned backdrop, exposing, if only for a moment, the mechanics of mediatization as well as the privileged place, as Paul Gilroy notes, "of visuality and visualization in the constitution of the fascist polity and the fascist public sphere" (150).

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If we turn now to Abbey's mural of the Round Table, which depicts Sir Galahad being led to the Siege Perilous (see Figure 3),[11] we notice that, in this panel, the apparatus with which the viewer is positioned – interpellated – as a desiring subject is configured quite differently from our earlier examples of the "crane shot." In the mural, the viewer is not positioned above as in the Riefenstahl, Boorman, and *Wigalois* images, looking down on a monumental, geometrically symmetrical spectacle.

[11] Henry James, in his published outline of the murals (which the Library still hands out to visitors even today), describes the scene: "The Arthurian Round Table and the curious fable of the Seat Perilous . . . in which no man has yet sat with safety, not even the fashioner himself, but into which . . . the young Sir Galahad, knighted by Arthur, has sworn a vow to be worthy to take his place. The Companions of the Order are seated in Arthur's hall, and every chair, save one, is filled. Suddenly the doors and windows close of themselves, the place becomes suffused with light, and Sir Galahad, robed in red (the color emblematic of purity), is led in by an old man clothed in white, Joseph of Arimathea, who according to one of the most artless features of the romance, has subsisted for centuries by possession of the supreme relic. The young knight is thus installed in safety in the Seat Perilous, above which becomes visible the legend, 'This is the seat of Sir Galahad.'"

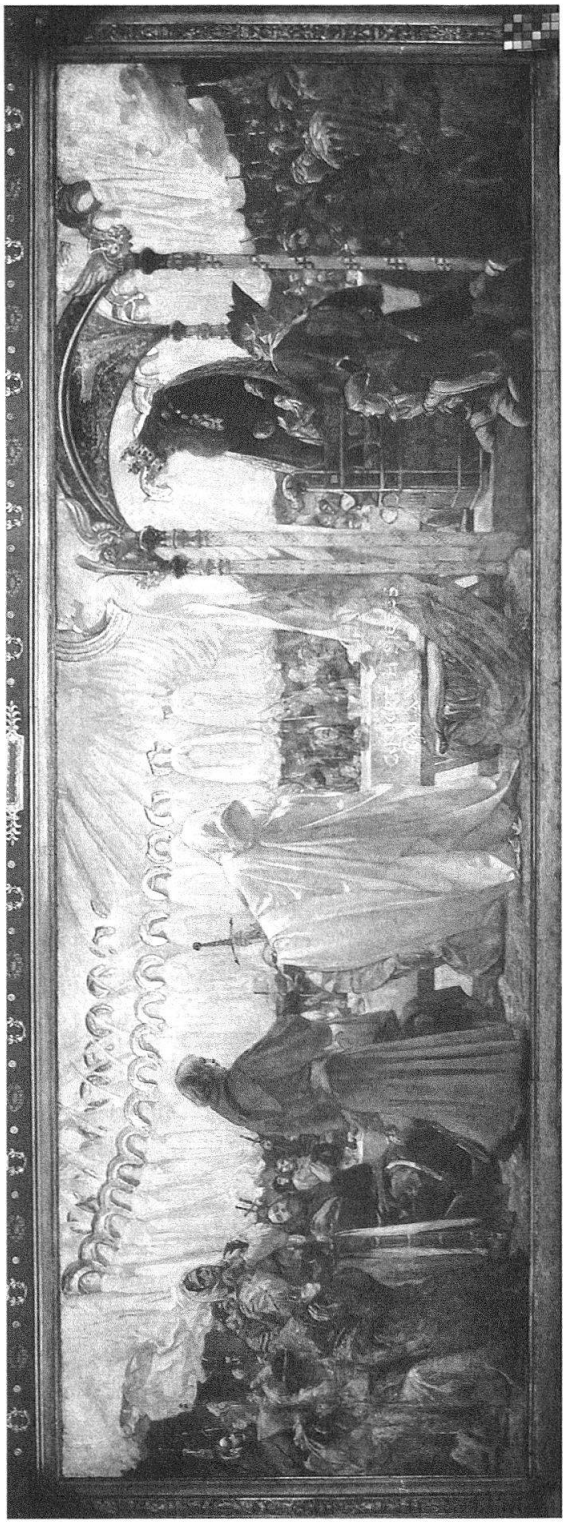

Figure 3: Sir Galahad at King Arthur's Court, Abbey Murals, courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library.

Instead, because the panels have been installed on the walls just beneath the ceiling, the viewer is positioned on the ground looking up, as if in a church. The photograph reproduced here, because it was taken at eye level (an impossible view), cannot recreate the effect of standing in the very dark paneled document delivery room of the Boston library – a room forty by sixty feet and twenty-one feet high – craning, literally straining, to see the picture perched above, just beneath the ceiling. This inverted geometry, however, still interpellates the viewer within an equivalent spectacle. By orienting the mise-en-scène horizontally, the frieze, at twenty-four by eight feet, attempts to convey a sense of the monumental size and scope of the Round Table – the heroism and grandeur of Galahad's story as well as the absolute hierarchy and authority implied by the massing of crowds around Galahad's manifest destiny. This horizontal orientation flattens out the picture (the effect bears a striking resemblance to that created by a cinemascope lens) so that the only clue we are given to the Round Table's roundness – to its three dimensional volume – is from the rows of angels that ring the top portion of the picture and suggest an effect like a cupola of a church. We are positioned in the middle of and below this circle, the other half of which is only implied by the picture. The interpellated viewer's eye is drawn up toward the host of angels arrayed in identical form across the expanse of the canvas. The anonymous identical forms cease to be individual; rather they create geometrical effects that signal the fascist sensibility of the painting. The viewer standing more than ten feet below is called to desire membership in this celestial fraternity whose superiority to the earthly community of the Round Table is everywhere underscored in the painting.

The painting is dominated by gold, white, and red. The intensity of these particular colors washes out everything else – especially King Arthur and his Round Table knights. In fact, the figures divide the canvas into three separate planes. The Round Table knights are sandwiched between the circle of angels at the top and the Grail knight and his entourage in the foreground. Abbey literally gives us two Round Tables as mirrors of each other: above, the angelic Round Table and, below, Arthur's terrestrial one. The angelic Round Table is bright, white, and gold. The terrestrial one is formed in duller earth tones, the persons sitting around it in various states of disorder. There is a suggestion that Arthur and his knights are fading away, especially at the edges where the figures turn nearly transparent. The Table and its knights have become back-

ground – and a faded background at that – to the primary action. The Round Table knights are bearded men, dressed in dull, washed-out colors. While they are almost completely obscured by activity in the foreground and the monumental massing of the angels in the background, they are a rowdy bunch with their swords prominently raised to the sky, their activity spilling over into the other two planes. They seem simultaneously to be celebrating Galahad's arrival and indifferent to it – would they behave differently were he not there to take his seat? The picture seems to indicate that the Round Table of the angelic host – with its bright white and gold colors – both dominates and replaces Arthur's knights, suggesting a new kind of celestial chivalry that will replace and perfect the earthly chivalry represented by the Round Table. In the foreground, Galahad, the knight destined to occupy the Siege Perilous, dressed in red and gold, is escorted by Joseph of Arimathea, who is attired entirely in white, connecting him visually to the angelic host. The Grail Angel – the flatness of the canvas making him seem enormous compared to the other angels (and everything else in the mural as well) – entirely in white would dominate the center of the mural if he weren't so transparent. The wings, reaching to the top of the painting, seem to form a dome above the action, repeating perhaps the dome of Arthur's baldachin.

The angels become the props for a fascist aesthetic that reduces individuality into the geometric rationalized body of the "masses"; the disarray of Arthur's court stands in juxtaposition to the perfect geometry of the angelic host. In effect, Abbey replaces what he sees as a dysfunctional medieval chivalry with a new kind of chivalry that deploys a fascist aesthetic to create new kinds of hierarchy. Both kinds of chivalry are narratively present at once; we are witnessing the end of one order and the inauguration, through Galahad, of another. All other members of Galahad's entourage similarly function as props to his messianic presence – Joseph of Arimathea, dressed in white, face obscured by his white hood, leads Galahad in, the Grail Angel who is captured at the moment he lifts the bright red grave cloth from the Siege Perilous, and finally Bors, who is visually linked to Galahad through his youth and beardlessness, a member of Arthur's court but utterly entranced by Galahad, his hands clasped in reverence, joy, and love.

To understand why the subject of the Holy Grail could serve as a fitting decoration for "the great Library, which stands as a visible expression of the mind and soul of Boston" (Baxter 13), we must turn to

an exploration of the political theory that supported late nineteenth-century American medievalism, a medievalism that looked backward toward medieval Europe – and especially England – as a point of origin that must be both honored and superceded. Jarman reads Abbey's medievalism as an embodiment of the "civic Republicanism" being promoted as an antidote for the political and economic corruption of the so-called Gilded Age. Chivalry, in this reading, becomes a means of inculcating the kind of civic virtue that had been so lacking in the scandals that rocked the last decades of the century. Galahad, the perfect Grail knight becomes "a prefiguration of modern youth born into a land which calls to him . . . for a consecration to deeds of service" (Jarman 18). Indeed, the architect of the Boston Public Library, Charles Follen McKim had engraved on the north façade of his building – the Boylston Street side – an inscription reading, "The Commonwealth requires the education of the people as the safeguard of order and liberty."[12] This inscription links the knowledge stored in the library to the ideals of democracy and freedom that are at the heart of American exceptionalism and for which Boston serves as an originary geographic site. Sylvester Baxter, writing only a few years after the last of the murals was installed, i.e. around 1904, confirms this reading when he writes:

> In the Delivery Room, the place where the people of the city receive their books from this their great storehouse of the world's accumulated lore, the exalted end implied in the pursuit of knowledge by the soul that hungers and thirsts for it as naturally as the body hungers and thirsts for meat and drink, it is fittingly symbolized in the theme selected so finely that it seems to have selected itself, as it were, precisely for the mural decoration of this very portion of the Library. 'The Quest of the Holy Grail' signifies the quest for spiritual enlightenment as pursued through life by the righteous soul of man, – the Grail, as we have seen, being the symbol for illumination of the soul through the wisdom that comes with the right use of knowledge." (Baxter 17, 19-20)

Why should these lofty ideals expressed by Abbey's contemporary be read by us at the beginning of the twenty-first century as an example of a fascist aesthetic? Although Jarman's readings of Abbey's murals focus primarily on their pedagogical function of promoting civic republican-

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[12] For 54 dollars today one can buy on the Internet a Boston Public Library canvas tote bag with that legend inscribed on it. "Imagine," enthuses the advertiser (Levenger, "Tools for Serious Readers"), "how many grocery bags you can carry in one trip rather than ten. And how easily yoga mats and gym gear will transport."

ism, he admits that such exhortations might have a darker side, might cloak "in the garb of elite culture" a system of social control designed to "re-legitimize tarnished capitalist ideology" (24), as we will try to demonstrate. Abbey's murals participated in the project that Gilroy describes as the "institutionalization, codification, and purification of [Europe's] imperially extended national cultures" (39), a project he (Gilroy) argues culminates in fascism: "The architects and managers of this process felt that stability and continuity depended upon the organized transmission of key cultural motifs, habits, and mentalities" not only to distant colonies, but "to a new public at home who would develop a relationship to the imperial project as supporters and potential colonizers" (39). By the time Abbey began work on his murals, Americans were beginning to imagine themselves as the direct cultural heir of this imperial culture. In fact, Abbey was to unveil this, the first of his murals, at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, a massive celebration of the *translatio studii et imperii*, the passing of civilization and imperial glory, from Europe to America (Jarman 289-91). The Chicago World's Fair was effectively a larger-than-life classroom whose students were the citizenry; the lesson being taught was that America was the most powerful nation in the world and Abbey's vision of the Holy Grail was part of the celebration. By the end of the decade, only a few years before Abbey would complete the series, victory in the Spanish American War propelled the United States to the status of a worldwide imperial power whose influence extended over far-flung colonies in the Philippines, Cuba, Hawaii, Guam, and Puerto Rico.

Grand public buildings with murals depicting American progress and greatness, buildings like the Boston Public Library, figured prominently in this *translatio studii et imperii.* To the extent that this transmission of cultural supremacy could be accomplished through monumental displays of public art, its reach could be extended both at home and abroad. Abbey's murals illustrate the privileged place of the visual Gilroy has described in the fascist aesthetic, the process by which subjects are interpellated and "become participants in an authoritarian compact as spectators with their vision focused on the omnipresent central icon of the leader/deity" (Gilroy 50). The Middle Ages with its tradition of monumental visual display stood as proof of the superiority of European civilization. Abbey's 1921 biographer, E. V. Lucas, argued that the Holy Grail had "a peculiar fitness as a symbol for a library where all learning was stored" because it was a subject "common to all literatures

and all countries" (vol. 1, 232). Apparently countries not contained within the European hegemony did not produce literature that could be imagined as part of the store of human knowledge and could be safely ignored. Abbey's murals installed in the document delivery room of the new Boston Public Library marked the place of imaginative literature in this broadly pedagogical strategy of imperial nationalism, a celebration of the superiority of European–and by extension American – culture and values.

The feudal ideology that suffuses Arthurian and grail legends – even so exalted a concept as chivalry – would, however, seem unsuited to carry the various meanings associated with American imperialism; it seems antithetical to the ideals so central to America's view of itself as a democracy in which hard work and perseverance at least ideologically replace inherited rank and privilege. America as the "New World" had been founded on the repudiation of the kinds of medieval hierarchies represented by Arthurian chivalry. In 1871, in "Song of the Exposition," Walt Whitman had dismissed Arthur, "Merlin and Lancelot and Galahad." They were "all gone dissolv'd utterly," inhabitants of a "void, inanimate, phantom world" (Jarman 88-89). Yet, despite the apparent contradiction between the ideals of liberty and those of chivalry, Alan and Barbara Tepa Lupack, in *King Arthur in America,* documented the concerted effort in the years leading up to the start of the twentieth century and in the first decades of that century to "redefine knighthood in terms of moral achievement rather than nobility of birth, inherited wealth, and physical prowess" (Lupack 59), that is, to supercede the authoritarianism of the Old World with a peculiarly American version of the ideal social order of chivalry. Abbey's murals participated in a programmatic effort to translate the political and social hierarchies of feudalism into a new chivalric order, still hierarchical, still authoritarian, but based on "the fraternal, the emotional, and the intellectual, with a constant element of spirituality," to quote the words of William Byron Forbush, founder of the *Knights of King Arthur*, a boys' club established in 1893 (the same year as the Columbian Exposition) that, at its height, boasted more than a hundred thousand members (Lupack 62). According to Baxter, "The Holy Grail is the symbol of spiritual enlightenment: the wisdom that guides men to shape their lives to right ends, that their souls may grow toward perfection, and that those thus directed may guide their fellows in the same path. This is the main function of human knowledge" (17-18). The goal of this American version of chivalry was

to inculcate, especially into young boys, very particular ideas about masculinity and to channel the "instinctive tendency in adolescent males to form gangs into a means of doing good deeds and developing character" (Lupack 62-63). A glance at the picture reproduced by the Lupacks of one such group, however, raises some disturbing images (see p. 61). The boys' makeshift knightly costumes resemble nothing so much as the costumes of white-robed Ku Klux Klansmen (an organization founded in 1866), who also fashioned their identities around the imagined ideals of chivalry valued in the South (61, see also Jarman 29-30). What else, we might well ask, do the Knights of King Arthur, the Ku Klux Klan (a peculiarly American form of fascism), and Nazis have in common besides a fondness for uniforms? The adaptability of Arthurian chivalry to representations of American exceptionalism did not escape the attention of one of the most famous admirers of Abbey's murals, D. W. Griffith, who planned to follow up *The Birth of a Nation*, his film extolling the Ku Klux Klan, with a cinematic version of the Grail quest based on Abbey's murals.[13] This resignification of chivalry at the beginning of a new century to fit values defined as distinctly American seems an attempt to channel to particular social ends the wilding instincts of contemporary "warrior bands," descendants of the men's leagues Max Weber argued had to be controlled for civilization and the state to emerge (Brown 187).

In this context, Abbey's Round Table mural might be read as an allegory of the historic transition from feudal monarchy to liberal individualism, as well as the translation of civilization from Europe to America: the celestial Round Table with its perfect rows of uniform and anonymous angels supercedes Arthur's fading earthbound Round Table. Wendy Brown has argued that the shift from feudalism to liberal individualism required a shift in the nature of authoritarian relationships, especially as they related to property, the family, and labor. In contrast to a medieval hierarchy in which individuals are bound to their overlords, the liberal individual is free, but that freedom is also a source of alienation. Liberal individualism did not eliminate social relations of dominance and submission so much as it depoliticized them. The modern American individual – represented in Abbey's painting by Galahad, dressed strikingly in red and led by a ghostly Joseph of Arimathea is

[13] "For the past two years," Griffith told an interviewer, "I have been desirous of producing 'The Quest of the Holy Grail' for the screen. I have been studying those wonderful paintings in the Boston Public Library" (Jarman 4).

"produced by and through, indeed as, this depoliticization of social relations" so vividly represented in the painting (Brown 112). Abbey's painting oscillates, as Theweleit argues the fascist aesthetic does, between the glorified individual, the perfected male body of Galahad, standing apart from the rest and representing "a whole new race, energy incarnate, charged with supreme energy. Supple bodies, lean and sinewy, striking features, stone eyes petrified" (2: 159), and the organization of similar bodies into new formations, new totalities marked by "the uniformity of contours," and "a combination of innumerable identically polished components" (2: 155): "the leg of the individual has a closer functional connection to the leg of his neighbour than to his own torso" (2: 154). Community, in this new social order, is reproduced in a "ghostly" way in the state (Brown 112). This is suggested in Abbey's painting by the totality-machine of the "celestial and otherworldly" choirs of angels, unseen by the knights of the Round Table, but the element of the painting toward which the spectator's eye is drawn, even as the earthly community of the Round Table is literally squeezed out. While Galahad is visually connected to the choir of angels by color, he is also separated from them, occupying a separate space, indeed a separate sphere. In becoming "celestial" and "otherworldly," abstracted not only from feudal bondage, but from the bonds of earthly community, the ideal of fraternity is fractured into a kind of radical individualism that Abbey felt best represented what he called the Celtic character.

If Galahad and the celestial angels represent a new chivalry, one that rewrites the older archaic of European chivalry, Arthur's knights, the knights of the Round Table, fading ghosts as they are, embody that archaic, an absent presence, supplemented, but never really replaced. They have been silenced, but remain cacophonous, they have been controlled but remain disruptive. They are receding, fading, being squeezed out, but somehow always there, haunting the present – and informing it as well – spirits of hyper-masculine aggression, enablers of colonial ambition. Even as Abbey's mural teaches us to desire the angels above the table, as it teaches us to desire the Grail knight – though perhaps not quite so much as Bors seems to – our desire is troubled by this supplemented past that just won't go away, a past that continues to remind us that the celestial chivalry represented by Galahad and his angelic host, while it may hint at a new paradigm, a new kind of genealogy, exalting the autonomous, free individual marked by a manifest destiny, is haunted by the spirits of the past, by the Middle Ages – and so too is

the viewer. The new chivalry offered by Galahad and his angelic host seems different, but it is really just another version – a remediation – of an archaic imaginary that refuses to disappear.

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