

Review of
The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric
and the Making of Images, 400-1200
by Mary Carruthers
(Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998, xviii + 399 pages
[ISBN 0-521-582326 hardback]

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[Published under the title 'Thinking Through Imagery' in *Film-Philosophy*, Vol. 3, No. 22 (May, 1999), ISSN 1466-4615. See <http://www.film-philosophy.com/vol3-1999/n22cameron>. The response to the review by Mary Carruthers, as requested by the journal, that appeared in Vol. 3, No. 38 (September, 1999) is appended. See <http://www.film-philosophy.com/vol3-1999/n38carruthers>.]

Review of
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Of what use could a book be to filmmakers, or to those who only think about filmmaking, that has been authored by someone who takes no interest in it, wishes to elucidate the disparate creative concerns of a small number of devout human beings who lived between 400 and 1200 A.D., ponders example after example of their work while comparing and contrasting alternative approaches by other scholars, and uses 400 pages to do so (including 85 pages of endnotes, a 25-page bibliography and a careful and copious 13-page index)? Of what use could this book be, in particular, to anyone but a connoisseur of medieval curiosities, disconnected from the exigencies of the modern world that would conflate history and myth to the dissolution of the former?

The answer, briefly put, is 'far more than one might think', though it will take a determined effort on the part of even serious readers to persevere until insight accrues. It would be silly of me to offer a standard review of this work to an electronic salon in film and philosophy, for only by working through the details of the author's descriptions of the 'images' reproduced painstakingly in the 32 plates of the book, and through her careful comparisons to others that are described at length but remain unreplicated, could one possibly take its measure. What I should like to convey, however, is some indication of its scope and of the relevance of its concerns to filmmaking.

Mary Carruthers, born in India of missionary parents, was educated there and later in Canada and the United States. Currently Professor of English and Director of the Centre for Research in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance at New York University, she published in 1990 a notable study, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, devoted to trying to understand how human beings solved the general problem of 'remembering' during the eight hundred years or so after the fall of Rome when it was the only game in town through which to perpetuate the intangible impressions of things past. Professor Carruthers has now followed it with a companion volume continuing her investigations into a particular aspect of the problem, namely how then did human beings use 'imagery' (mostly monks and nuns, but others as well), and by means of what tools, to enable them to encompass within their own contemplative behaviour what had been thought in the past about God and his creation, and to work through it into new ways of meditating upon them?

The book consists of an introduction followed by two chapters placing the problem within its historical and intellectual context. The first chapter is divided into three parts: 'Collective memory and *'memoria rerum'*', 'An architecture for thinking' and '*'Memoria rerum'*, remembering things'. The second is a single unit entitled "'Remembering Heaven": the aesthetics of *'mneme'*". Three chapters of culminating case studies then conclude the book: 'Cognitive images, meditation, and ornament', 'Dream vision, picture, and "the mystery of the bed chamber"' and lastly "'The place of the Tabernacle"'.

Borrowing a distinction from the comparative study of religions, Carruthers affirms at the outset that she wishes to unpack a pervasive 'orthopraxis' as opposed to an 'orthodoxy' of the medieval era. Our Western religious traditions, then and now, have been primarily orthodox (centring upon distinguishing canonical texts and delineating one's obligations to 'believe' what they say) rather than orthopractical (concerned with fitting oneself into a long-term pattern of imitative devotional behaviour through which one would hope to achieve a working and evolving enlightenment beyond the bounds of articulation). Pockets of orthopraxis, however, have bucked the trend and did so especially during the long period from the fall of Rome to the rediscovery of the Greek intellectual tradition in the late medieval era that eventually precipitated the Renaissance (for which we must thank Arabian custodians and commentators). Using tools of 'imagery' to enable one to sustain and develop the capacity to think unceasingly and inventively about God and his creation as part of one's ongoing devotional behaviour was a keystone of the practices required for 'remembering', for, as Carruthers shows, 'remembering' was for them an indivisible process of pushing older ways of thinking into unknown regions of the new, rather than, as for us, constructing accurate descriptions of things past. Whatever 'mimetic' aspects remembering might then have had were subservient to the ongoing instrumental task of rethinking God and his creation with unceasing creativity (*'mneme theou'* rather than *'mimesis'*; p. 3f).

It may seem odd for me to concentrate here upon a distinction put bluntly by an author at the very inception of a text, but, as Carruthers to her credit is aware, it encompasses the 'philosophical' foundation upon which she builds her book and ought to give pause to those of us coming to it from newer crafts like filmmaking. As Austin or Wittgenstein would have anticipated, the delineations Carruthers draws among the varieties of response that her subjects took to their task of trying to 'remember' are about as startling and provocative as they could be when contrasted to our own uses of events of the past (including using films to represent them over and over).

Even more resonant, however, at least for me, is the affinity Carruthers notes between how the tools created so long ago affected those who made and used them in profound and ongoing ways, and how those rare but comparable tools of reflective construction affect us within our contemporary world. Even her detailed descriptions of the tools of

'imagery' once found useful on the roads to 'remembering' are of contemporary if unobvious relevance, for her interests are centred, and knowingly so, upon the kinship of those rare and remarkable things human beings have constructed, early and late, to enable them to bring the past to bear coherently upon their futures, even (and especially) when they have been unable to say how. In her final chapters, Carruthers is simply grounding within a distant past the efficacy she describes earlier, in an astonishingly apt 'diversion' within her first chapter, of the Vietnam monument in Washington, D.C. that has, by common consent, enabled both veterans who opposed and those who supported the war to work individually through their own integrated memories, feelings and thoughts by means of it, while deepening their awareness of a unifying recognition surpassing articulation.

Again, I can recommend this book only to those students of filmmaking accustomed to drawing forth and bringing to bear upon their interests insights found within writings by others unacquainted and uninterested in them. To those few, however, I can attest that this is a careful, thorough and profound essay on its subject, and indirectly on filmmaking as well; for filmmaking, only in part and only at its best, is a tool for entrenching within us memorable and hence ponderable 'images', as were the tools used by those careful, thorough and exacting creators to whom Mary Carruthers, through hard labour, has granted us access.

Appendix

Response to the Review by Mary Carruthers

[The author's response, as requested by the journal, appeared within *Film-Philosophy* in Vol. 3, No. 38 (September, 1999). See <http://www.film-philosophy.com/vol3-1999/n38carruthers>.

Some time ago, Evan William Cameron reviewed my book *The Craft of Thought*¹ in this ejournal. He gave it a thorough and most thoughtful reading, the sort any author is delighted (and somewhat astonished) to get, especially being someone as far from the field of interests of your readers (I presume) as I am. But I was invited to reply, or continue the conversation, and I hope the tardiness of my response won't make you conclude (as you might) that medievalists have clearly lost all sense of timeliness and currency.

The readers and members of *Film-Philosophy* are of course interested in the cognitive value/utility of 'moving' images, and thus whether people in the Middle Ages had any sense of moving images. It is in fact quite remarkable that medieval images are always chastised (rarely praised) for their static qualities: indeed 'static' has been made into a hallmark of the Middle Ages by generations of scholars, especially medievalists themselves. But they really should know better, on the basis of their own reading.

As I researched material on the cultivation of images and mental imaging techniques as an essential tool for meditation in early and late medieval pedagogy and practice, I was struck by how medieval writers, from at least Gregory the Great (6th century) onward, describe painting in their minds images that move. I'm not just speaking of realistic and emotion-generating movement, such as the imagining the flowing blood and tears at the Passion, but also the detailed imagining of all sorts of scenes from one's reading, both sacred and secular (and not just involving visual detail but all the senses as well). Images were also to be manipulated mentally (there is a monastic idiom of 'the hand', as well as 'the stomach', 'of the mind'). Hugh of St Victor (12th century) describes imagining a complex encyclopedic diagram based upon the structure of Noah's Ark, which begins as a plan 'painted' on a flat surface, and then is 'raised' in the author's mind in its elevated cross-section, by 'pulling up' a central column that had initially been 'drawn' as two halves splayed out flat across the 'floor' of the planar view.

Often for meditation, the person doing the imagining describes 'walking' about and through the pictures in his mind, even as a participant in the activities. Medieval

¹ Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric and the Making of Images, 400- 1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

painting looks static to us simply because we aren't used to its conventions, but the pictures often consist of individual scenes that one is invited to 'walk' among mentally and re-vision in one's own 'mind's eye'. That process, which demands a high degree of mental activity on the part of a viewer/participant, is fundamental in medieval art and literature; far from static, the perspective changes constantly as one moves and is moved through it.

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