

constraints within genre are widely and effectively explored, those having to do with the conditions of productions and receptions, as well as with other traditions, remain tantalizingly in the background of *Perplexing Plots*.

The very notion of an Anglo-American tradition could have been more fruitfully problematized as it runs the risk of reinstating older critical stances on crime narratives that have been questioned by more recent scholarship, such as the study of film noir as a uniquely American phenomenon and the neglect of other national, but also transnational, traditions, like Mediterranean and Nordic noir. To be fair, Bordwell's corpus of crime literature and film is already imposing and the author shows awareness of his concentrating on a specific tradition. Yet his conceding that "other national and cultural traditions would yield many differences" is immediately counterbalanced by the observation that some of the principles persist in other traditions, as "narrative audacity and finesse have no boundaries" (409). In addition, given the Anglo-American focus and the inclusion of contemporary additions to the variorum brought by Tarantino and the gynocentric thrillers, the study devotes scarce attention to the New Hollywood detective stories and paranoid thrillers by Arthur Penn, Alan J. Pakula, Francis F. Coppola and Roman Polanski, as well as to the more liberal investigations of police corruption by Sidney Lumet. The inclusion of these narratives, which, as scholars of the New Hollywood have argued, are more character-driven than plot-driven, would have provided a challenging test to Bordwell's argument.

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Journal of American Studies, 58 (2024), 2. doi:10.1017/S0021875824000215

Matthew Dennis, *American Relics and the Politics of Public Memory* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2023, \$32.95). Pp. 436. ISBN 978 1 6253 4711 4.

In *American Relics and the Politics of Public Memory*, Matthew Dennis offers a deeply researched, highly readable, and ultimately groundbreaking study of American relics – what Dennis defines as “ruins, residue, vestiges, souvenirs, [and] mementoes of the past” – and their often supercharged cultural and political meanings (xi). This fascinating book will likely serve for decades to come as a jumping-off point for scholars interested in the sacralization of material objects and their role in the construction of American collective memory.

With some notable exceptions (such as lynching photographs, which were transferred onto postcards and sold as souvenirs), the relics that Dennis examines were not created to commemorate anything. Instead, they are often ordinary objects that draw significance from their connection to a specific historical event – or, rather, a particular political construction of that event. This book is a meditation, via a series of vivid and detailed case studies, on the ways, never politically innocent, in which certain things become much *more* than mere things. For example, an empty chair on the US Senate floor, left vacant for years by a Republican legislator who was attacked and seriously injured in 1856 by a pro-slavery colleague, becomes a seat of dynamic political symbolism. Wheel ruts created by nineteenth-century wagon trains, reverently preserved, come to signify the heroic spirit of the Pioneer, or, less generously, the path of American empire and its displacement of indigenous peoples. And twisted girders and other large pieces of debris emerge from the dust cloud of the Twin

Towers attack to stand as stark reminders of trauma *and* patriotic resilience within a diaspora of material 9/11 remembrance. Remarkably, no fewer than 1,200 large-scale artifacts from Ground Zero now reside in community memorials and museums located throughout the United States.

Dennis shows that people can become relics too – or, rather, *relicts*, human holdovers from an earlier time, revered for their association with epic historical events. Such was the status of the Marquis de Lafayette when, as an old man, he returned to the republic he had helped establish a half-century earlier and met with adoring crowds. Described in chapter 3 of this study, Lafayette's tour of America in 1824–25 often brought the *relict* into contact with the *relic*, as citizens produced family souvenirs from the days of the Revolution, such as old muskets and swords, for the marquis, a secular saint, to examine and further sanctify through his touch. Dennis's discussion of relicts, later expanded to include the last of the Pioneers (a group venerated, as it dwindled, by white Americans on the former frontier), is tangential to his main concern with the inanimate. Nevertheless, the parallels that he draws between the sacralization of various historical objects and the idealization of history's living remains (one thinks here of the patriotic cult of the so-called Greatest Generation) makes us consider the braided themes of history, public memory, and corporeality in a new and provocative way.

One would think that a country whose claims of exceptionalism often invoke an escape from history would have little interest in enshrining any sort of artifact. But the book's collection of chronologically arranged case studies, spanning 250 years of history and divided into three clusters of chapters, proves otherwise. It turns out that Americans have long had a deep passion for relics. Part I of *American Relics and the Politics of Public Memory* demonstrates that collectors and curators in the early republic eagerly accumulated meaningful curios, ranging from Mastodon bones to artifacts associated with the Founding Fathers, to legitimize a young nation via a displayable *material* history. Sadly, relics of indigenous origin played little role in this showcasing of an American past. Intellectuals at the time (including Thomas Jefferson) saw no connection between supposed vanished peoples, like those who constructed earth mounds, and contemporary Native Americans, and they regarded objects left behind by the continent's earliest inhabitants as largely unworthy of serious study. This excellent section effectively establishes two important points – first, that relics invariably serve a politically usable past, and second, that the selection process that confers the status of “relic” upon an object is, of course, itself political. The absence of indigenous artifacts within what we might call the national cabinet of curiosities established during the early republic forcefully illustrates the latter point.

The next group of chapters examines relics associated with westward expansion, the Civil War era, and racial violence in the Jim Crow South. Throughout this section, Dennis analyzes a host of remarkable objects with powerful and sometimes conflicting meanings. For example, his chapter on mementoes of the Old West, large and small, includes a fascinating discussion of the enormous Willemite Meteorite once regarded as a “living being” by the Clackamas people of the Pacific Northwest, who lost their connection to this sacred object when they were forcibly removed to a reservation in the 1850s. Today this fifteen-ton extraterrestrial visitor resides in New York City's American Museum of Natural History, where it stands as both a magnificent scientific specimen and an unsavory reminder (for those who know its history) of the spoils of Manifest Destiny. Dennis's consideration in the next chapter of relics tied to secession and sectional violence focusses, appropriately enough, on gore-stained garments.

However, his extended discussion of “the bloody shirt” as a ubiquitous trope that soon became disconnected from any literal artifact causes the study to momentarily lose its footing. The rhetorical analysis here is deftly handled, but it shifts our attention away from the actual three-dimensional objects, whether relics or relicts, that are the book’s central focus.

Fortunately, the superb chapter that follows quickly re-engages with material culture – though of a most unsettling variety. Dennis’s analysis of what he terms (quite fittingly) “atrocious relics” includes, among other things, an uncomfortably close look at grisly keepsakes collected at public lynchings and the commercially reproduced photographs that documented these grotesquely festive occasions. Here we see that while relics are solid and unchanging, the political messages they convey are not. For example, once they were published by the NAACP in the early twentieth century, lynching images originally intended to intimidate African Americans and to celebrate white supremacy increasingly inspired feelings of shame and repugnance. “By the 1930s,” Dennis writes, “white supremacists seemed to be losing the public contest to control the meaning of lynching relics and photography. By then such materials were central to antilynching activism” (207). But history, it seems, will always produce more “atrocious relics.” Dennis closes this disturbing chapter with a quick discussion of Edward Gallagher, a US Navy Seal commander who in 2017 notoriously posed for a “trophy shot” while holding up the dead body of a young ISIS fighter (214). Like lynching photographs, this nauseating souvenir, meant to be triumphant, ultimately backfired, inspiring disgust and disapproval rather than patriotic approbation.

Part III registers a late twentieth-century shift in the meaning of the museums where relics are often displayed. Dennis shows that museums today increasingly focus on victims, rather than on celebratory historical narratives, and this insight informs his extended analysis of the haunting artifacts housed within the National September 11 Memorial and Museum, as well as the bits and pieces of the World Trade Center scattered across the nation. Thanks to its focus on the interaction between preserved debris and commemorative space and architectural design, this section of the book offers one of the most insightful analyses to date of America’s chief site of 9/11 memory. A brief epilogue – counterintuitive in its conclusions, like so much of this study – contends that our national hunger for relics has only intensified in the age of the virtual. Various groups committed to historical preservation and documentation now rush to collect memorabilia associated with events that are *still unfolding*, such as the Black Lives Matter movement and the COVID 19 pandemic.

American Relics and the Politics of Public Memory reflects a recent turn toward material culture in fields ranging from military history to literary studies. However, Dennis’s approach is unique. His book is a far cry, for example, from titles that explore a historical event through “100 objects” or the like. Instead, Dennis focusses on pieces of inanimate matter that paradoxically *live*, that act upon those who view and handle them. Readers will note the many places where he likens treasured curios from American history to those of the Middle Ages – the saints’ bones, pieces of Christ’s cross, and so forth that drew worshipful pilgrims. This fine study reminds us that we still live in a world of sacred relics; however, the very real power that they carry stems not from the realm of the Divine but from that of the political.

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