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FILM-PHILOSOPHY

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Review: Maria Pramaggiore (2008)  
*Neil Jordan*  
Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press  
ISBN 978-0-252-07530-8  
216 pp.

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Neil Jordan is one of the most respected film directors working today, but never achieved the celebrity of contemporaries such as Steven Spielberg or Francis Ford Coppola. In part, this may be due to Jordan's disinterest in repeating himself: as with Billy Wilder, there's no such thing as a typical Neil Jordan movie, which makes life interesting for audiences and critics alike. The result of treating each film project as a new and independent experience is often admirable, sometimes disastrous, but the fact remains that despite commonalities (Jordan has cast Stephen Rea in many of his films, for instance) every Jordan film is unique. Consider this question: if you didn't know it to be a fact, would you believe that the same man directed the indie hit *The Crying Game* (1992), the

Hollywood flop *We're No Angels* (1989) and the Jodie Foster vehicle *The Brave One* (2007)?

Jordan is the odd man out in other ways as well. He was a successful writer before he was a director (his short story collection *A Night in Tunisia* won the *Guardian* Fiction prize in 1976) and has continued to pursue a career in writing parallel to his career as a director. Jordan wrote or co-authored many of the screenplays for his films (he has a writing credit for 12 of his first 15 films) and continues to write fiction as well: his most recent novel, *Shade*, was published in 2004. Jordan has also worked in a variety of contexts and with all types of financing, from the Irish Film Board to BBC's Channel 4 to Hollywood's Geffen Pictures and DreamWorks.

Pramaggiore's *Neil Jordan* offers a detailed analysis of Jordan's works, and is an excellent contribution to the literature of film studies as well as an essential volume for those interested in Jordan's works. She treats his films thematically rather than historically, finding common approaches and content which act as unifying forces and suggests that although there may not be a single type of Neil Jordan film, there is a Neil Jordan style and approach which is evident over the course of his career and can be identified in both his successful and unsuccessful films. Because of this consistency, she sees Jordan as belonging at least in part to the tradition of the art-film *auteur*, although the filmmaker does not embrace this characterisation of himself.

Pramaggiore identifies several themes which she finds are common to Jordan's films. The first is fragmentation of identity, which she argues reflects the average human experience in the modern world where familiar frameworks such as nationalism, organised religion, and gender roles are often perceived as both untrustworthy and irrelevant. Characters in Jordan's films reflect this fragmentation by treating identity as a performance which can be constantly revised as their circumstances change: a good example is the various transformations of Stephen Rea's character Fergus Hennessey in Jordan's best-known film, *The Crying Game* (1992). Due to the filmgoer's pact which prohibits giving away this film's secret, I can only say that the role performance is a key

element for all the major characters in this film, and that national, political, and gender identity are all questioned throughout.

A second characteristic Pramaggiore identifies as common to many Jordan films is his expression of a gothic sensibility. By "gothic" she means not only the use of obvious symbols such as haunted castles, vampires, and ghosts, but also a general sensibility which includes a fascination with death and decay, the breaking down of boundaries between reality and fantasy, and expressions of out-of-bounds sexuality. These themes are obviously central to *The Company of Wolves* (1984) and *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), which Pramaggiore refers to as his "monster films", but Pramaggiore also traces their presence in Jordan films as diverse as *The End of the Affair* (1999) and *We're No Angels*. She also notes that, unlike traditional gothic tales which operate in a context in which the gothic is set up in opposition to the normal, and which end with the restoration of normality, in Jordan's films there may be no normal, or normal may be just another fictional representation.

A third Jordan commonality identified by Pramaggiore, which is really more an approach than a theme, is his embrace of the post-modern sensibility characterised by irony, self-referentiality and skepticism, often expressed through violation of the conventions of cinematic realism. She sees this approach as a natural complement to the post-modern world inhabited by the characters in many of his films, in which the old institutions can no longer be relied upon and identity is just a performance which can be changed or edited as circumstances require.

After an introductory chapter setting out what Pramaggiore identifies as common themes, techniques and approaches in Jordan's film, she groups Jordan's films into clusters of 2-4 and discusses them in separate chapters with a particular analytic point of view or common theme traced throughout the films discussed in that chapter. Sometimes this approach works well: the chapter on the use of popular music in *Mona Lisa* (1986), *Angel* (1992) and *The Crying Game* brilliantly explicates how music in these films is used to disrupt chronological time and geographic place, bring the past into the present, and express the cyclical nature of lived time for the characters. On the other hand, the chapter

discussing Jordan's uses of ghosts in *High Spirits* (1988) and *Michael Collins* (1996) feels forced, as if the two films were shoehorned together because they had to be included somewhere, and there are only so many ways to sort 16 films into five chapters.

Oddly, for a monograph discussing a director whose career includes both extreme highs (an Oscar for *The Crying Game*) and lows (the all-around bomb *High Spirits*), Pramaggiore largely avoids discussing the success of particular films or differentiating between successful and unsuccessful expression of the same themes in different films. The result that her close analyses of the films, valuable as they are, sometimes miss the forest for the trees. Painstaking explication of the themes of an individual film, without consideration of whether the end result is effective or not, results in a book which sometimes seems to be denying the actuality of the films themselves except as fodder for academic analyses. Occasionally her avoidance of evaluative comment also strains credibility, not to mention the reader's patience. The cheesy costumes and special effects in *The Company of Wolves* are not a brilliant evocation of the uncanny or a postmodern break with cinematic convention: they're cheap and tacky and harm the film's effectiveness. This raises the question, since not all of Jordan's films are easy to obtain and most readers won't have seen them all: how much should we trust an author's judgment about films we haven't seen, when she proves unreliable for those we have?

There's also an oddly disembodied sense to many of the discussions: although Pramaggiore does occasionally discuss real-world considerations such as production context, she clearly regards these concerns as secondary to her main analyses of theme and device. This is an odd choice for a film scholar, who should understand better than anyone that filmmaking, unlike novel-writing or poetry, is a collaborative activity which requires substantial amounts of money to happen at all, and no small measures of good luck to be successful. An interesting exception is Pramaggiore's discussion of the script revisions of *High Spirits*. Perhaps the film would have been no more successful if the original script had been shot, but the fact that many of the revisions served to de-Irish the film sheds light on how a film can change radically as the different parties

involved make demands which may serve their interests but in combination can result in a muddled and ineffective final product.

Somewhat surprisingly, given the length and distinction of Jordan's directorial career, his films have only recently received book-length scrutiny. Perhaps his refusal to be kept in a box has discouraged scholarly appraisal of his work: Jordan's films certainly defy simple characterisation and finding the commonalities among them requires substantial (although not unrewarding) effort. Ironically, as Hollywood often neglects a subject for years before several films on the same topic are released almost simultaneously, so the only two monographs on Jordan's films were released within weeks of each other in 2008. Carole Zucker's *The Cinema of Neil Jordan: Dark Carnival* (2008) is of comparable length, and organised similarly, to Pramaggiore's book. Zucker also finds unity in diversity among Jordan's films by tracing common themes, although some of the themes differ, as does her general approach: Zucker places more emphasis on Irish folklore as an influence, and is more willing to make judgments about the success of individual films or elements within them. The only other book devoted to Jordan's films is *Neil Jordan: Exploring Boundaries* (2003) by Emer and Kevin Rockett, which is more of a film-by-film handbook to Jordan's works (including large doses of plot summary) than a critical examination of them.

*Neil Jordan* concludes with a fifteen-page transcript of an interview conducted with the director in June, 2007. It also includes a detailed filmography including Jordan's television work, an extensive bibliography (17 pages, for a book whose main argument is expressed in 150 pages), and index.

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