

Alien Territory:
Romantic Resistance and National Identity in Films by
Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger

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ABSTRACT

Michael Powell's and Emeric Pressburger's films sit untidily within the dominant paradigm of 1940s British Cinema. This thesis examines how far their work partakes in a discourse of nation (and how far it can be referred to as 'British'). It also identifies 'sites of resistance'. In the context of the 1930s and 1940s, Section 1 briefly considers the terms 'nation' and 'national cinema' as hegemonic discursive strategies

Section 2 sees Pressburger's immigrant status as introduces the running motif of 'alien territory'. Images of 'Home' are considered in terms of his exile; Powell's aestheticism is discussed, while 'magic spaces' in the films are taken as self-reflexive metaphors for cinema itself.

Section 3 focuses on two wartime films, *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* and *A Canterbury Tale*. These 'narratives of aspiration' are considered in the light of Fredric Jameson's notion of ideology as utopia. *Blimp* charts the rejection of an old order and the emergence of a hegemonic state. Alluding to Korda's Imperial epics, its construction of masculine authority is examined. With *A Canterbury Tale*, the pastoral imagining of England is examined, referring to Kipling, while links are made to the British Documentary Movement (especially Humphrey Jennings).

In Section 4, the focus shifts to foreignness and hybridity. German elements in 1930s British cinema are charted (and their Romantic/Expressionist credentials). A relatively international cinema is seen to be submerged as a realist cinematic aesthetic establishes itself. *The Spy in Black*'s gothic antecedents are looked at via the spy genre's engagement with the 'Other'; and Anton Walbrook is studied as an embodiment of a Germanic aesthetic in British cinema. In Section 5, the post-war Technicolor melodramas are examined in the light of the cultural retrenchment post-1945. The representation of women, and the role of spectacle is examined.

CONTENTS

1: INTRODUCTION

Film and Country - Some Appropriate Questions	1
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2: ROMANTIC ILLUSIONS

2.1	André Bazin & the Archers: Total Cinemas	11
2.2	The Place of the Artistic Voice	19
2.3	Pressburger and Exile	23
2.4	Questions of Aesthetics	32
2.5	Magic Spaces and Alien Territories	37
2.6	Romanticism and the Establishment	42

3: CINEMA AND BLIGHTY

Introduction	47
--------------	----

3.1 Playing with Soldiers: Sentiment and Satire in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*

3.1.1	Ambiguity or Inconsistency	56
3.1.2	The Emergent and the Residual	64
3.1.3	Re-Writing Genres: Quizzing the Epic of Empire	70
3.1.4	Proving Manhood: The Rules of the Game	86
3.1.5	Incorporating Otherness	97

3.2 Equivocal Arcadia: *A Canterbury Tale* and the Cultivation of England

3.2.1	Images of England	106
3.2.2	Nostalgia and the Pastoral	122
3.2.3	Connecting with Kipling	134
3.2.4	Marking Resistance: Anti-Realism / Realism / Documentary	142
3.2.5	We're off to see the Wizard	155
3.2.6	Conclusion	160

4: HYBRID CINEMA

Introduction	163
--------------	-----

4.1 'German' Traces and 'British Cinema': a Brief History

4.1.1 Germanic Traces in Pre-War British Film Culture	166
4.1.2 Cultural Antecedents: Nineteenth Century Germany	179
4.1.3 The German Stage	183
4.1.4 Expressionism and its part in Cinema	188

4.2 Two Case Studies: *The Spy in Black* and Anton Walbrook

4.2.1 <i>The Spy in Black</i> : Nosferatu at Hoy	199
4.2.2 Anton Walbrook	223

5: POST-WAR MELODRAMA

Introduction

The Historical context	239
A Transitional text: <i>A Matter of Life and Death</i>	256

5.1 The Post-War Technicolor Melodramas: Synthesis and Fragmentation:

5.1.1 Pre-Composition and Synaesthesia: Manufacturing Absolutes	266
5.1.2 The Melodramatic Form: Women, Hysteria, Music	287
5.1.3 Consuming Spectacles: a Cinema of Attractions	318

6: CONCLUSION

Abandoned Consensus - The Post-War Position

National Identities	334
Romantic Resistance	338

7 Filmography 348

8 Bibliography 354

1: INTRODUCTION

film and country - some appropriate questions

As I write, greater Scottish and Welsh autonomy within the British Isles is being pursued, peace initiatives in Northern Ireland, wrestling with conflicting forms of national and provincial identity, have recently been rewarded with a Nobel Peace Prize, and trading in a single European currency has commenced, shifting the ongoing debate regarding the nature and degree of Britain's administrative and economic harmonisation with Europe into a new and more urgent phase. Borne out of this set of realignments has been an awakening assessment of what it has meant, and will mean, to be English. Of course, this specific form of identification has long been used, vaguely, inaccurately and with imperious assumption, to represent the United Kingdom at large. Yet if the signifying function of 'Englishness' is indeed being re-settled, this need not necessarily invoke the clarion call of a muscular or bullish Nationalism. The debate has more to do with re-conceptualised forms of identity. Although appeals to an assumed sense of Englishness often *are* bound up with a specifically *right*-ist agenda, there is nothing automatic in this association. The issue may rather be phrased to take into account what sorts of identity are imaginable, what badges of belonging are being tabled, and to whom these badges are offered. In short, Englishness need not connote a 'Little Englander' mentality. If Englishness suggests an awareness of tradition, it can also suggest an acceptance of the modern. Neither *need* it invoke a sense of racial purity, for 'England' can be a wide and pluralistic idea, celebrated for its 'incomingness', allowing claims to tolerance, generosity

and diversity, admitting its post-imperial circumstances, its multi-ethnic communities and its broadening integration within Europe. Such aspirations can be part of the idea.

What the shifting parameters of this debate expose is that national identity is a process, ever in the making. It is not an 'essential' quality, however much it is wrapped (and thereby naturalised) in such a myth. The crucial dilemmas underpinning Britain's currently disputed sense of nationhood are these: how far can the psychic boundaries of what we mean by the nation be stretched; how far can restrictive definitions be overrun by an acceptance of difference; how far can the foreign be incorporated or the 'alien-within' be granted a devolved self-determination, before the once-understood concept of the authentic nation state ceases to have any substantive meaning? At what stage does a national discourse, so 'diluted', lose its place within a culture determined by international or regional factors, and ultimately when does the idea of national discourse itself become redundant?

Settling such questions is part of the process of negotiation and consent by which civil society holds together. Antonio Gramsci, in his *Prison Notebooks*, makes an important distinction between the "direct domination or command exercised through the State" and the "function of hegemony which the dominant group exercises throughout society."¹ It is this hegemonic operation, defined by Gramsci as the "intellectual and moral leadership"² of a social group, which aims to secure stability by winning and actively maintaining consensus, bringing the masses to identify socially with the interests of the governing group. The form of ideology conceived by Gramsci is dynamic, marked by

¹ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (Lawrence & Wishart: London, 1971), p. 12.

² Gramsci, p. 57.

consolidation, resistance and incorporation. Applying his theory to an analysis of leadership in the formation of the modern State of Italy, he argues that this is how power is won. The hegemonic, however much recourse it has to the use of force, engages in strategies of containment. Bolstered by its prestige, it ceaselessly monitors its borders, checking dissent and re-negotiating its encounters with Otherness.

Giving a generous reading to those inclusive strategies, it could be argued that the hegemonic strength of a modern state (it is particular so in liberal democracies) depends upon the degree to which it entertains diversity. Whether or not we care to see such containment as an entertaining or as a suppression, what remains constant within the Gramscian paradigm is that it at least acknowledges a constantly articulated interaction between dominant/authoritarian voices and the margins. This is a less monolithic view of the 'national'. It is de-essentialised, and is made ambivalent, conditional and double-voiced. In his consummate and subtle account of the discourse of nation, Homi K. Bhaba homes in on the critical question: "What kind of cultural space is the nation with its transgressive boundaries and its 'interruptive' interior?"³ The intrusion of the marginal into what he terms the "cultural organicism, the deep nation, the long past" quizzes the hegemonic assumptions of the centre, and as a result, the boundaries of the nation are admitted to be "containing thresholds of meaning that must be crossed, erased, and translated in the process of cultural production."⁴

How far, then, does the idea of a 'national cinema' in Britain mirror this theorised dialogue? First, a snapshot of a moment which antedates by a few years what has often been seen as the high-water mark of 'British National Cinema.' Graham Greene,

³ Homi K. Bhaba (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (Routledge: London, 1990), p. 5. Bhaba makes the point that the nation, as an "articulation of elements" (p. 3), is an always unfinished discourse. As a cultural site crossed by conflicts it is a 'stage' on which Gramsci's dynamics are to be witnessed.

⁴ Bhaba, p. 4.

reviewing *The Marriage of Corbal* (dir. Karl Grune) in 1936⁵ for *The Spectator* observed with disdain the film's international credits and, finding his viewing experience to have been "appalling", strays beyond his specific remit to ask the question, "What is an English film?"⁶ His comic yet bilious diatribe caricatures the English film industry of the 1930s.

In a grotesque register, his profile is a pessimistic one:

(Noting) the dark alien executive tipping his cigar behind the glass partition in Wardour Street, the Hungarian producer adapting Mr. Wells's ideas tactfully at Denham, the German director letting himself down into his canvass chair at Elstree, and the London film critics (I speak with humility: I am one of them) exchanging smutty stories over the hock and the iced pudding and the brandy at the Carlton, I cannot help wondering whether from this great moneyed industry anything of value in the human spirit can ever emerge.⁷

The superior tone marks a xenophobia. Greene regrets that Britons have "saved (the industry) from American competition only to surrender it to a far more alien control."⁸ He denounces "a system of nepotism" in which émigrés find jobs for each other to the exclusion of English technicians. Despite praising the English craftsmanship of films such as *Song of Ceylon*, *The Voice of Britain*, *The Turn of the Tide* and *Night Mail* (all of which are within the 'quality' documentary aesthetic which formed both the bedrock of British realism and a bulwark against American escapism), Greene has little time anyway

⁵ Throughout this thesis, the first reference to a film is accompanied by the year of its U.K. release and the name of the director. Thereafter this information is not repeated. All films cited are listed in the Filmography.

⁶ Graham Greene, 'The Marriage of Corbal', reprinted in John Russell Taylor (ed.), *The Pleasure Dome: Graham Greene: The Collected Film Criticism 1935-1940* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1980), p. 78.

⁷ Greene, p. 80.

⁸ Greene, p. 80.

for what he dismisses ironically as “the art of the cinema”.⁹ For him, “it remains almost as unrealized as in the days of *The Great Train Robbery*. The peepshow, the fun-fair, the historical waxworks are triumphant (and) in some moods appear to be a chamber of horrors.”¹⁰ The ideological links which Greene forges are familiar within the discourse around British cinema: qualitatively, the realism of a documentary filming practice which expresses a middle-class liberal ethos is praised; popular entertainment, admitted to be part of cinema’s prehistory is disparaged; and a sensational gothic terminology is used, paradoxically, to ridicule hated manifestations of gothic sensationalism and of the foreign.

Greene draws on a tight and authoritarian definition of ‘Nation’ which sees hybridity as monstrous. His argument rests upon a policy of strict *containment*, in which a discretely signified England needs protection. That which falls within the confines of his definition is to be accepted (and he speaks pointedly of “Englishness” throughout, omitting any reference to the larger or greater Britain). But the sharply sketched caricatures peopling the industry he claims to observe, and the very “darkness” of his Wardour Street executive, are indices of paranoia: there is a sense that borders have been transgressed. If Greene does not openly answer his own question (“What is an English film?”) his offended sensibilities suggest that his answer would draw upon the language of essentialism. The purity of the tribe has been defiled.

Greene is having fun, and his own long involvement in cinema indicates a stronger hope for the medium *per se* than is suggested here. But the terms of his argument expose the problems of a ‘national cinema’: how far does the notion rely upon the politics of nationalism, and how far does the construction admit diversity and opposition? At a

⁹ Greene, p. 80.

¹⁰ Greene, p. 80.

conceptual level, these are the crucial questions. What I wish to argue is that, following Bhaba's recognition of an "anti-nationalist, ambivalent nation-space (which) becomes the crossroads to a new transnational culture,"¹¹ so too can a distinctively national cinema allow for difference, engage with international factors, remain in some very real and cultural senses 'nationally specific' without necessarily peddling an authoritarian or conservative set of values. The extent to which any putatively homogenising function of 'national cinema' can be rejected before the construct ceases to have any substantive meaning is at the centre of current debate (and it mirrors my comments about 'diluted' national identity made above).

A clear and articulate instance of the current debate is to be seen in an ongoing dialogue between Andrew Higson and John Hill, one which I can do no more than acknowledge here.¹² The function of British cinema, as Higson suspiciously views it, is "to pull together diverse and contradictory discourses, to articulate a contradictory unity, to play a part in the hegemonic process of achieving consensus and containing difference and contradiction."¹³ While he chooses to emphasise differences at the point of *consumption* and endorses reception studies with its notion of the active audience, Higson remains mindful of film *production*, but what he calls for is the renewal of minority cinemas (such as black, feminist, gay, green or socialist cinemas) rather than for a re-energised 'national' cinema *per se*.

¹¹ Bhaba, p. 4.

¹² See Andrew Higson, 'The Concept of National Cinema', *Screen*, vol. 30 no. 4, Autumn 1989. His position is maintained in Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1995). John Hill sets out his argument in John Hill, 'The Issue of National Cinema and British Film Production', in Duncan Petrie (ed.), *New Questions in British Cinema* (B.F.I.: London, 1982).

¹³ Higson (1995), p. 275.

John Hill disputes Higson's premise of what a national cinema is: for him, "the idea of a national cinema in itself does not necessarily imply this sense of 'fixity'."¹⁴ Consequently the idea of national cinema is worth preserving. Higson is accused of running together the issue of national specificity with the rather different categories of social coherence and stability. Second, Hill's suspicions are directed to the potentially legitimating and politically quietist directions taken by academic study into audience research. Hill thus warns that "although motivated by 'progressive' cultural impulses, the combination of critical suspicions of the 'national' and populist celebrations of audience preferences may simply end up endorsing the operations of the market place ... and hence the restricted range of cultural representations which the market provides."¹⁵ Higson's liberal voice rejects 'national cinema' because his own model of it suffers from an innate conservatism; Hill's leftist voice, more solidly within the politicised discourse of Cultural Studies, redefines national cinema broadly and plurally as a site of potential resistance to the market place and to multi-national capital.

There are merits in both perspectives. Given his premise, Higson's shying away from national cinema is laudable. Yet what he downplays is that the Gramscian sense of the hegemonic is neither settled nor monological (that is merely its utopian goal). Hegemony may well be the attempted containment of diversity, but containment suggests acknowledgement, and it is the site of internal pressure. What is more, to be contained is not to be erased: incorporated deviancy may, after all, continue to harry the dominant! More importantly, the 'other cinemas' Higson calls for may well be configured differently (gay, black, feminist etc.) but given the prowess of nationally determining factors, it is

¹⁴ Hill, p. 15.

¹⁵ Hill, p. 18.

difficult to see how they could exist without reference to the social and historical conditions of national subjecthood (and thereby belong in some sense to the nation's culture). Neither can the texts of such cinemas be ideologically compartmentalised as tidily as Higson seems to suggest. At the very least, therefore, national cinema may thus be maintained, if only as an umbrella term. The argument could be extended to suggest that 'national cinema' by definition must embrace a plurality of voices. Tom Ryall, closely aligning himself with John Hill, envisages just such a containable diversity. For him, "The notion of a sub-current or an alternative oppositional strand of national cinema is important in the analysis of the idea of a national cinema itself... National cinemas in their overall profile necessarily reflect such differences."¹⁶

Such differences are marked, of course, within concrete, specific texts, the structures of which contain the same eddying cross-currents and conflicts. These structures offer masquerades of spurious coherence: plausibilities of story-line and consistencies of subject position which it is the task of what Alan Sinfield terms "dissident reading" to expose.¹⁷ This charting of polysemy and observation of deviance worries away at dominant meanings and hegemonic structures. British wartime cinema, conforming more closely to Higson's unifying institution than any cinema in the country before or since, clearly offers up texts whose commitment to central, dominant ideals invites such investigation. Given the strength with which a mythic version of the English 'spirit' permeated accounts of wartime, and strove to mute any of the more mongrel instances of British culture which had arguably had freer rein in the pre-war years, the period stands as an exemplary instance of popular and official culture's collaborative

¹⁶ Tom Ryall, *Alfred Hitchcock and the British Cinema* (Athlone Press Ltd: London. 1996). p. 79.

¹⁷ See Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Clarendon Press: Oxford. 1992).

establishment of what can only be termed a 'national ethos'. That national cinema, consensual, broadly appealing, offering leadership, is an exemplar of the hegemonic, and as such is a site of negotiation.

The place of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger within this cinema (however defined or redefined) is also contentious. As guilty of foreign input as Graham Greene's witheringly reviewed *The Marriage of Corbal*, their collaborations challenge definitions of both the nation and the national cinema, particularly given the tone of British celebration which is in part to be found in their work. Given the wartime prestige ascribed to documentary realism and to the communal aesthetic, Powell and Pressburger's reputed 'Continentalism' and Romanticism placed them at times beyond the strictly defined parameters of suitable 'British National Cinema'. Section Two of this thesis addresses the nature and extent of this Romanticism to quiz their 'outsider' status. Section Three interrogates the consensual communal and patriotic version of 'national cinema' which achieved prominence during the war years, and examines Powell and Pressburger's place within it through close attention to two films: *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* and *A Canterbury Tale*. Written by an exiled Hungarian, filmed by foreigners, these works venture far into the centre of Bhaba's "deep nation (and) ... long past" - paradoxically as much to praise it as to bury it.¹⁸ Abandoning chronology, Section Four changes perspective. It straddles the war years to address the Germanic influences on Powell and Pressburger: such influences are visible in their first collaboration which antedates the war (just); and they flourish in the post-war period. The post-war Technicolor works, examples of which are examined in Section 5, seem to violate more rudely the 'restraint' with which British cinema might be associated.

¹⁸ Bhaba, p. 4.

speaking more of a failure to ‘contain’ or be contained, drawing more on a melodramatic genre which articulates fracture and dissidence, in whatever contorted fashion, these films seem to expose the limits of a tightly drawn “national cinema” (such as Higson’s). The implications of this fracture are considered alongside Powell’s oft-stated longing for a cinema which might express a unified “organic whole.”¹⁹ Highly wrought they may be, yet despite their outright rejection of realism, and despite the fact that on the surface they are reluctant to engage with contemporary social and historical conditions (and in a sense are ‘art films’) what are *Black Narcissus* or *The Red Shoes* if not British films?



¹⁹ Michael Powell. *A Life in Movies* (Mandarin: London. 1992). p. 581.

2: ROMANTIC ILLUSIONS

2.1: André Bazin and the Archers: Total Cinemas

Imagine a white screen. It is floating mystically and perfectly in the ether, abstracted from the material determinants of history. This is the essential condition which André Bazin pictures in his essay “The Myth of Total Cinema”. An unashamedly idealised vision, for Bazin cinema is itself “an idealistic phenomenon. The concept men (*sic*) had of it existed so to speak fully armed in their minds, as if in some platonic heaven.”¹ What he argues is that an innate human need for “the recreation of the world in its own image”² was harboured with patient anticipation, until belatedly the idea crystallised into matter. *Entrée Cinema!* While, as always, Bazin is richly, religiously, persuasive and passionate, as an account of the institution’s invention his metaphysical version clearly shields itself carefully from the empirical inconveniences of well-chronicled fact.³ However, the important point for Bazin is that cinema’s development is more than just the history of technological development. The myth he formulates, and the Platonic structure on which he draws, serve as a highly idealistic justification of his aesthetic preferences. The champion of Realist Theory (and important proponent of

¹ Bazin’s was originally published in four volumes between 1958 and 1965, and subsequently translated into English by Hugh Gray. See André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* (University of California Press: London, 1967), p. 17.

² Bazin, p. 21.

³ See Michael Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks: The Prehistory and Early Years of Cinema in Britain* (Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1996). Chanan is critical of Bazin’s myth and investigates the historical (scientific, economic and industrial) circumstances of cinema’s development.

Italian Neo-Realism), Bazin conceives of a cinema whose *raison d'être* is mimetic. Of the earliest cinematic pioneers, "in their imaginations they saw the cinema as a total and complete representation of reality; they saw in a trice the reconstruction of a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color and relief."⁴ Bazin's myth is thus the answer to a timeless hunger for illusion. Because the cinema which perfectly reproduces reality in all its diversity has not yet been attained, for Bazin 'cinema' (as an ideal concept) simply does not exist.

It may seem wilfully perverse - a forced reading, very much against the grain - to begin a study of Powell and Pressburger (who are hardly realists) by invoking the name of André Bazin. As John Ellis has shown, the dominant critical discourse surrounding British Cinema in the 1940s often found Powell and Pressburger's films so troubling because the critically endorsed aesthetic was bound to a particular form of realism.⁵ That prescriptive aesthetic preference was intertwined with moral, and ultimately national imperatives. Hence Richard Winnington's assessment of *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946) found it to be "even farther away from the essential realism and the true business of the British movie than (Powell and Pressburger's) two most recent films."⁶ It is this very particular notion of national cinema that I refer to throughout when I refer to the construct "British National Cinema." This is obviously not the sole version of 'national cinema' available to us: it is a prescriptive, partisan,

⁴ Bazin. p. 20.

⁵ John Ellis. 'Art, Culture, and Quality', *Screen*, Vol. 19, No. 3, Autumn 1978, p. 81. A substantially revised version of this essay, retitled 'The Quality Film Adventure: British Critics and the Cinema 1942-1948' can be found in Andrew Higson (ed.), *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema* (Cassell: London, 1996).

⁶ Richard Winnington, *News Chronicle*, 21/11/46. The review is included in the B.F.I. micro-file for *A Matter of Life and Death*.

and highly contentious concept, tightly drawn, exclusive and patrician. It is in relation to this definition of 'British cinema' that I wish to consider Powell and Pressburger.

Before addressing some major points of departure between Bazin and Powell/Pressburger, it is worthwhile noting what it is that connects them, for Bazin's memorably invoked notion of "total cinema" echoes some of Michael Powell's more ardently Wagnerian statements about the medium. Decisively, both Bazin and Powell speak of a cinema which is driven by a fundamentally idealistic philosophy. With their visionary faith in cinema, the Romantic Powell and the Classicist Bazin have much in common. Classic and Romantic approaches are, however, not necessarily in opposition: Raymond Williams makes this very point:

The artist perceives and represents Essential Reality, and he does so by virtue of his master faculty Imagination. In fact, the doctrines of 'the genius' (the autonomous creative artist) and of the 'superior reality of art' (penetration to a sphere of universal truth) were in Romantic thinking two sides of the same claim. Both Romanticism and Classicism are in this sense idealist theories of art; they are really opposed not so much by each other as by naturalism.⁷

To acknowledge this shared language is to free oneself from a routinely erected binary opposition: namely that between realism and anti-realism, a restrictive, partisan distinction which tends to concretise much film criticism. For Bazin, cinema's highest potential is 'pure realist documentary', whereby the undecorated fabric of the world is recorded by the camera with its ambiguous inter-relationships intact (hence his preference for deep-focus and for the long-shot). Significantly, however, it is the realist *fiction* film which he most readily endorses. Here, the mode of apprehending

⁷ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1961), p. 56.

reality, and thereby exposing its vital inter-relationships, is paramount. Truly 'naturalistic' film-making, with its potential anarchy and fragmentation, is not his ideal. It follows from this that he sees technological developments which aid cinema's representation of reality as 'refinements', satisfying a pre-given desire to mediate between the phenomenal and the ideal. Sound, colour and '3D' thus return to cinema its 'essential' condition: they allow for the realisation of its mythic promise. Bazin is quite explicit about this: "If the origins of an art reveal something of its nature" he writes, "then one may legitimately consider the silent and sound film as stages of a technical development that little by little made a reality out of the original 'myth'."⁸ Bazin's acceptance of an essential filmic 'nature' and of an *a priori*, pre-phenomenal cinematic state confirms his idealistic credentials.

Location shooting is one of the markers of 'documentary realism', and despite Powell's love of location work - most evident in *The Edge of the World* (1937) and *49th Parallel* (1941) - *The Archers* clearly also draw on traditions of the fantastic and the Gothic. However, both the remote 'alien territories' of these films and the highly wrought fantasies in *The Red Shoes* (1948) and *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1951) draw upon a Romantic culture. As for Powell's idealism, the notion of cinema to which the volumes of his autobiography return is one of magic and wish-fulfilment. "In my films", he boasts, "miracles occur on screen"⁹). His is a striving towards the transcendental; Bazin's is the encapsulation of an idealised reality. Powell's repeated motto that "all art is one"¹⁰ invokes a Romantic idea of totality and controlled

⁸ Bazin p. 22.

⁹ Michael Powell, *A Life in Movies* (Mandarin Paperbacks: London. 1992), p. 612.

¹⁰ This is the opening motto to the second volume of Powell's autobiography. See Michael Powell, *A Million Dollar Movie* (Mandarin Paperbacks: London. 1993).

expression: “unity of purpose among all my collaborators towards an ideal film became a religion for me.”¹¹ Despite the Wagnerian overtones of Powell’s chosen maxim, it is culled from Rudyard Kipling’s story “The Wrong Thing” in the collection *Rewards and Fairies* (originally published in 1911). In Kipling’s tale, the motto is an endorsement of general craftsmanship and of the medieval creative community. Its hero, Hal O’the Draft (a medieval artisan) is spirited across the centuries to meet his twentieth century counterpart, an old Sussex builder. Hal waxes lyrical when describing the teamwork he enjoyed in building the old King’s chapel: “‘Twould have done your heart good, Mr. Springett, to see the two hundred of us - masons, jewellers, carvers, gilders, iron-workers and the rest - all toiling like cock-angels.”¹² The catch-phrase “All art is one” thus takes on a political imperative. It is a specific articulation of an idealised work ethic and an argument against restrictive practices, a sentimental yearning for a pre-capitalist era safeguarded from the brutal exigencies of the cash nexus and the market driven economy. This is entirely in keeping with the spirit of Powell and Pressburger’s most Kiplingesque work, *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), where distinctions of gender, race and class are effaced in the interests of a shared war-time identity based around a common history of feudal practice (and that film’s aged blacksmith Horton is a counterpart to Kipling’s Springett). Significantly, of course, Mr. Springett, in his pastoral haven, has been unaffected by historical developments: his communion with Hal’s spirit depends upon a shared value system remarkably unimpeded by the rigours of capitalism. The “labour” they each speak of is not the alienating, dehumanising factory work associated with the industrialised or commercialised world. Rather, it is

¹¹ Powell (1993), p. 546.

¹² Rudyard Kipling, *Rewards and Fairies* (Macmillan: London, 1955), p. 66.

the life-affirming stuff of dignified craftsmanship. Just as Kipling's tale recounts the relationship between the various medieval craftsmen and the king who has commissioned their work, Powell's chosen motto incorporates a longing for artistic freedom granted by the bountiful and yet detached patron (and this Romantic provision of an unfettered creative space is something which Powell and Pressburger would for a while seem to enjoy under the terms of their contract with J. Arthur Rank). Just as Hal's recollection anticipates the collaborative ideal of the Archers production team (an ideal which is most successfully inscribed into *The Red Shoes* as the Lermontov ballet troupe, where dancers, choreographer, designer, musicians, conductor and composer pool their talents in the name of the dance) so Powell's depiction of the director as a "jack of all trades"¹³, marshalling the expertise of his chosen craftsmen, ringingly endorses Hal's call for co-operative endeavour. Auteur theory is rooted in a valorisation of the individual creative personality and is indebted to a what is essentially a Romantic philosophy. Powell's idealisation of a creativity founded upon collaboration does not contradict his auteur status. His collaborative ideal can be seen to recut the Romantic creed of the individual artist to fit the technological scale and shape of industrialised film production.

Perhaps there is an inconsistency between Hal's fundamentally pragmatic call for a de-mystification of the various crafts, and the more highly Romantic aspects of the Archers 'myth', such as Powell's claim that his "craft is a mystery" and that he is "a high priest of the mysteries."¹⁴ In Powell and Pressburger's work we certainly find a fetishisation of the cinematic medium. In what amounts to a manifesto of the Archers'

¹³ Powell (1992), p. 48.

¹⁴ Powell (1993), p. 16.

values, Powell notes down their shared feelings about artistic freedom and collaboration in a letter to Wendy Hiller written early in 1942, before her pregnancy removed her from the anticipated cast of *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943).

Significant among these aims are the following:

we owe our allegiance to nobody except the financial interests which provide our money; and to them the sole responsibility of ensuring them a profit not a loss.

every single foot in our film is our own responsibility and nobody else's....

no artist believes in escapism - and we secretly believe no audience does. We have proved at any rate that they will pay to see truth, for other reasons than her nakedness.¹⁵

I shall return to Powell and Pressburger's contractual arrangements later, although at this stage it is convenient to point out that they did successfully negotiate a high degree of artistic freedom, particularly under J. Arthur Rank. The third item selected from their manifesto warrants closer inspection. Given that the critical attacks levied upon the Archers' films were often spurred by a suspicion that they lacked a proper seriousness, and that their failure to meet the required criteria of realism was a frivolous irresponsibility and a wayward indulgence, we might read this statement as something of a defence. Romantically inspired artists have always striven to capture an artistic 'truth' (by which we may mean a subjective sense of reality created from an imaginative response to external stimuli). While such poetic truths may not accord with the dictates of empiricism, neither can they be dismissed as 'mere' fantasy (in the pejorative sense of the word). *A Matter of Life and Death* repeatedly attests the

¹⁵ Kevin Macdonald. *Emeric Pressburger: The Life and Death of a Screenwriter* (Faber and Faber: London, 1994), p. 189.

psychological truth of its more fantastic sequences. And if ‘truth’, in Powell’s words, has value beyond its mere ‘nakedness’, what concept is he nudging towards if not some Keatsian aesthetic appreciation of its Romantic beauty, its sense of form, its expression of an ideal sense of totality or unity?

With films such as *Black Narcissus* (1947), *The Red Shoes* and *The Tales of Hoffmann* the Archers move towards what Powell terms the ‘composed’ film, using the soundtrack to construct “an organic whole of dialogue, sound effects, and music.”¹⁶ Of course, these films are also prime examples of the use of Technicolor, and Powell was ultimately and eventually enthusiastic about the expressive potential which these technical developments offered (Chapter 5.1 looks at these films more fully). Superficially, there might seem to be a similarity here between Powell’s “organic whole” and Bazin’s “total cinema”. Yet Powell initially regretted the possibility that technological developments might take cinema towards what Bazin hoped would be a “perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color and relief.”¹⁷ Rather, Powell recalls an irritation that synchronised sound would lead to the foregrounding of the human voice over imagery. The ‘talkies’ represent a debasement, erecting a language barrier across what for the internationalist Powell was a purely pictorial and cross-cultural medium. “And then” he writes of this historical moment, “when nation was talking to nation in the most direct and simple way, the blow fell. Synchronised speech had arrived.”¹⁸ Allying himself with Hitchcock, he praises *Blackmail* (1929) for retaining the priorities of the silent era: “(Hitchcock) shot the

¹⁶ Powell (1993), p. 541.

¹⁷ Bazin, p. 20.

¹⁸ Powell (1992), p. 182. See, however, Chapter 4.2 of this thesis for a discussion of the spate of multi-lingual international productions born out of the ‘Film Europe’ project in the 1930s.

picture retaining all the intimacy and imagery of a silent film, in which the director always had the camera in the right place. Then he reworked it as a sound film, a style which was to stay with both him and me for the rest of our working lives. For us, a movie would always be a piece of visual entertainment with sound and dialogue heightening it.”¹⁹ He is nostalgic for the primal perfection of the silent period and in a moment of rosy meditation can be found reflecting that “Truth lies in black and white, and it always did and always has.”²⁰ For Bazin, of course, these periods merely mark transitional moments in cinema’s destined evolution towards the illusory replication of an equally idealised actuality.

2.2: The Place of the Artistic Voice

Idealists they may well be, but there is a very real sense in which Powell and Pressburger’s approach is decidedly at odds with Bazin’s. I have referred to Bazin as a “Classicist”: he proposes that the technical potential of the medium to capture reality should be maximised by the *elimination* of obvious human intervention. The effects of ‘artistic expression’ should be erased to optimise the prime function of cinema: it is a window, allowing for “a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist.”²¹ Accordingly, Bazin’s idealism is fundamentally impersonal, and his view of art, in keeping with his classicism, is that it is mimetic. He is also a ‘genre critic’, identifying generic conventions and establishing formal rules by which specific films may be analysed.

¹⁹ Powell (1992). p. 196.

²⁰ Powell (1993). p. 556.

²¹ Bazin. p. 21.

Given that genres are pre-existing structures, individuated to a greater or lesser degree by auteurs, any strict conformity to genre would suggest film-making from a classical position, whereas tension between the individual artist and his chosen form marks a struggle for personal expression. It is notable here that only a few of Powell and Pressburger's mature films can be tidily situated within clearly demarcated genres (their work often incorporates conflicting discourses, and the refusal to adhere to generic patterns is evidence of this). Perhaps with the exception of some of what could be termed their 'war films' Powell and Pressburger display at most a partial conformity to genre. While *49th Parallel* and *....one of our aircraft is missing* (1942) might appear in any standard filmography of the Second World War, even these works offer up some resistance to expectation and exhibit a greater structural similarity to the form of other Powell and Pressburger films than to other generic war films. They share a central theme which is characteristic of the Archers and which is plainly reworked throughout their career: namely that of the group tested by a strange new territory, whether literal or psychological. It is a structure which occurs in a variety of genres (*Black Narcissus*, for example). As 'war films' depicting the 'home front', other works such as *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* and *A Canterbury Tale*, (discussed Chapters 3.1 and 3.2) are among the most unusual, idiosyncratic treatments of Britain at war. Given this predilection for personal expression, the output of the Archers clearly welcomes an auteurist approach.

Clearly, however, the familiar credit to their work, "Written, Produced and Directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger" - two separate identities conflated under the collective banner of 'The Archers' - throws a gauntlet down at the feet of the auteur critic. Historically, assessments of their work have tended to side-step this issue by marginalising or forgetting Pressburger's contribution (something

which the compendiousness of Powell's autobiographies and the *brio* of his persona have done little to prevent, despite Powell's continuous praise of Pressburger and his insistent reminder of their shared billing). While avoiding the pitfalls of crudely determined and reflectionist deductions between the author and the work, connections may nevertheless be ventured between the form in which creativity specifically manifests itself and the broader context of cultural conditions (a context which includes the lived experience of the individual 'voice'). It is possible, after all, to address the issue of creative agency without resorting to the metaphysical language of the individual autonomous Romantic genius. The author may or may not be the source of all meaning but is a 'site of struggle' nevertheless. This is something which, as Duncan Petrie has argued, film theory has had to wrangle with as it has shifted its focus from the author/creator, through an auteur-structuralist conception of authorship, to what he terms the "valorisation of the spectator."²²

Michael Powell, in charge whether on the studio floor or on location, most readily fits the role of director, yet it is easy to be seduced by his charismatic image and to credit him with too great a role. His reliance upon his collaborators is clear: he is indebted to his designers, cinematographers and editors; he allows his actors to contribute fully in the artistic process. Yet much the same could be said of many an auteur. Not all directors demand an active personal involvement in all stages of production. It is not that Powell is cavalier or dilettante over the craft of film-making (far from it): rather that he places trust in his crew. Consequently, while the temptation remains to seek simplistic correspondences between the Powell persona and the works (from the interest in European styles of film-making to the much cited

²² Duncan Petrie, *Creativity and Constraint in the British Film Industry* (MacMillan: Basingstoke, 1991), p. 13.

'visual sense', the interest in the macabre or the morbid, and the predilection for red-headed women), it is an error to place too much faith in such speculations. While the films often do display a Powellian exoticism (in keeping with his cosmopolitanism and extravagance), Pressburger's involvement, whether as originator of the original storyline or not, complicates the simplicities of the Powell-as-auteur theory. Other factors, such as the input of the cinematographer, and his access to and facility with the Technicolor process, clearly impact upon the 'meaning' of the produced work.

While it would be incorrect to say that Pressburger has been generally overlooked in appreciations of the films he co-directed with Powell, there is some justification in saying that his light was in part eclipsed by his partners. In the last few decades there has been more of an interest in his contribution though.²³ This has partly been an inevitable consequence of the flurry of attention given to Powell since the publication of his memoirs. The working relationship between the pair was obviously mutually beneficial, and while it is a matter of historical record that Pressburger would initiate storylines or adaptations, rework them with Powell, and tended to operate more successfully with financiers in the production role, perhaps the relationship can best be characterised in terms of the catalytic effect the Pressburger structure and story would have upon Powell's visual imagination. Pressburger did not, of course, involve himself with the actual shooting of the films. What has received

²³ Macdonald (1994) has been the major contributor here. Kevin Gough-Yates' article, 'Pressburger, Exile and England', *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 5 No. 12, December 1995; and A. L. Kennedy's personal response to *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* have furthered the recent interest in the screenwriter's role. See A. L. Kennedy, *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (B.F.I.: London, 1997). Earlier contributions, however, acknowledged Pressburger's role. Kevin Gough-Yates early piece, *Michael Powell in Collaboration with Emeric Pressburger* (B.F.I.: London, 1971) accompanied the retrospective of their work which he programmed at the National Film Theatre in London. Ian Christie later organised a full retrospective at the National Film Theatre in 1978 (with accompanying programme notes to coincide with a lecture given by both film makers). Section 2.3 below examines Pressburger's position with regard to national identity, focussing on his "alien" status, the anxiety this created (and which is readable in his screenplays), and his romanticisation of England.

rather less attention is any explanation of why the collaboration between the two should have been so felicitous and productive, and the degree to which the overarching ideology of wartime Britain played a unifying role, binding together and blurring the experiences of these very different artists (for clearly, although their partnership spans a much greater period than the Second World War, this was the period in which their distinctive style was forged).

2.3: Pressburger and Exile

Perhaps the best starting point in assessing the personal input of the pair is their respective experience of expatriation and their relationship to their cultural environment, because it touches upon what is a recurring motif in their work: the treatment of 'alien territory' as either a demonised or magically idealised space. Again, there is an echo of the Romantic period here, where the subjectivism exhibited in the creation of visually imagined worlds is mirrored by the state of exile which was central to the experience of many English poets of the time (most notably the emigrations of Byron and Shelley, but just as significantly the removal from the metropolis to the rural environment which inspired the Lake Poets).

While the young Michael Powell expatriated himself to France temporarily, voluntarily and opportunistically, for Pressburger the situation was more critical. Denied the stable national identity within which Powell matured, and experiencing an enforced vagrancy from childhood, his works recurrently search for an idealised home and for a condition of stasis. As Kevin Macdonald points out, "Throughout his life he harked back to his idyllic rural childhood, and was ever aware of the continuity and

values of rustic life.”²⁴ This upbringing within an agricultural community is, of course, what his childhood has in common with Powell’s (and indeed with the Hungarian Alexander Korda’s, the biography of whose early life is startlingly similar to Pressburger’s²⁵), albeit that Powell’s experience was from a gentleman farmer stock rather than on a feudal estate. Arriving in Britain after a history of insecurity (financial and political), Pressburger’s apparently rapid cultural assimilation was born out of necessity, was facilitated by his affiliation to Korda’s Hungarian ‘enclave’ at London Films, and is written into and largely celebrated in his works. Losing members of his family to the concentration camps, there may seem to be an eloquent topical silence in his screenplays, yet it is one which speaks through the idealisation of domesticity, Englishness and the pastoral, and through the Romantic longing which figures with such consistency in his films.

Pressburger’s response seems to have been typical. In her account of the assimilation of German Jews into English society as a result of the rise of Hitler, Marion Berghahn reports numerous interviews with second generation settlers which suggested that “certain characteristics of the English lifestyle are highly valued - as they are also by the older generation - and the relative lack of them in German society is criticised. The main one is ‘decency’, but they also include fairness and the inclination towards moderation. The precision and clarity of the English language is especially valued in contrast to German, which so easily inclines towards obscurantism.”²⁶ An admiration of decency and of moderation, delight in the acquisition of a new language:

²⁴ Macdonald. p. 8.

²⁵ See Karol Kulik. *Alexander Korda: The Man Who Could Work Miracles* (W.H.Allen: London 1975).

²⁶ Marian Berghahn. ‘German Jews in England’, in Gerhard Hirschfeld (ed.) *Exile in Great Britain* (Berg Publishers: Leamington Spa. 1984). p. 301.

Theo Kretschmar-Schuldorf, perhaps the most obviously autobiographical of Pressburger's characterisations, exhibits these very traits.

The migrant experience seems to have been a crucial one. It might well be argued that the sense of exile is a normal condition for the modern writer, wrestling with societal change, the loss of identity, the slow ache of alienation and a fractured relationship with the past. Existentialism, the search for a subjectively interpreted and validated truth, is perhaps bound up with the very conditions of exile and alienation (the writing of Beckett immediately suggests itself as a case in point). 'Émigré status' can thus be seen to be bound up with modernity, as a facet of the alienation which is felt to be part of the twentieth century Western condition. As Terry Eagleton points out in a study of modern fiction, "the seven most significant writers of twentieth-century English literature have been a Pole, three Americans, two Irishmen and an Englishman," the Englishman Lawrence sharing a sense of marginality with Conrad, James, Eliot, Pound, Yeats and Joyce by virtue of his working class status.²⁷ Given the loss of known cultural landmarks, the resulting shock of disorientation and the sense of anomie which accompanies the arrival in alien territory, it is likely that bearings will be sought from other co-ordinates and that, in an existential gesture, the self should thus become a central organising principle. This Robinson Crusoe-like arrival in an strange new world is, of course, to be seen in *A Matter of Life and Death*. There, David Niven, washed ashore, alone on a beach which may be an idea of Heaven, may even be an evocation of classical antiquity complete with a young naked shepherd boy, but which transpires to be the south coast of England, quizzically notices his shadow on the sand as proof of his existence. With Pressburger there is a fondness for continuity

²⁷ Terry Eagleton, *Exiles and Émigrés: Studies in Modern Literature* (Chatton and Windus: London, 1970), p. 9.

rather than for the sudden break, and he shows an idealistic belief in transcendental absolutes rather than an ongoing sense of unresolved spiritual crisis. This suggests a continued relationship with the past which sets him apart from the rigorously critical and agnostic stance associated with more radical branches of modernism. Nevertheless his re-negotiation of the present in terms of an invented and imaginative Romantic territory is his own reaction to similar social and ideological upheaval.

“The basic response (to deracination, exile and alienation)”, writes Andrew Gurr, “is a search for identity, the quest for a home, through self-discovery or self-realisation. In the metropolitan regions - Britain and America for instance - this has usually taken the form of a search for a past, a cultural heritage.”²⁸ This point is elsewhere endorsed by the émigré writer Joseph Brodsky:

A writer in exile is by and large a retrospective and retroactive being ... Whether pleasant or dismal, the past is almost always a safe territory, if only because it is already experienced; and the species' capacity to revert, to run backward - especially in its thoughts or dreams ... is extremely strong in all of us, quite irrespective of the reality we are facing.²⁹

Gurr goes on to argue that “Insecurity prompts the (exiled) writer to construct static worlds, to impose order on the dynamic, to see the dynamic as chaos.”³⁰ Generalisations are imperfect, but it can well be substantiated that this is just the sort of reaction which we find in Pressburger's writing. His first collaborations with Powell, *The Spy in Black* (1939) and *Contraband* (1940) show evidence of this initial phase of insecurity through drawing upon familiar thematics and devices from German

²⁸ Andrew Gurr, *Writers in Exile: The Creative Use of Home in Modern Literature* (Harvester Press: Brighton, 1981), p. 14.

²⁹ Joseph Brodsky, ‘The Condition We Call Exile’, *New York Review of Books*, vol. 34, no. 21, 21.1.88), p. 16.

³⁰ Gurr, p. 24.

Expressionist cinema (as Chapter 4.2 explores in some detail, this is something which the casting of Conrad Veidt in each film reinforces). Each of these works presents conditions of destabilisation presented in their lack of 'home'. Their settings involve either geographically marginal locations or transient places - the 'Three Vikings' restaurant in the latter film serves as a model of the subcultural enclave offered as a temporary haven to the film's territorially dispossessed Danes. Later in their work, there is often a tension between motion and stillness. Both *A Canterbury Tale* and *I Know Where I'm Going!* (1945) are structured around arrested journeys. They decelerate. Images of velocity - trains, boats and cars - are pitted against the static: secure beds, castles, crofts, farmhouses, cathedrals, a caravan symbolically bereft of its wheels. In *A Canterbury Tale* the slow plodding of cart horses openly conflicts with the destructive speed of bren-gun carriers. Exploring the values for which the film believes the war is being fought, *A Canterbury Tale* calls for meditation, for a moment of studied reflection and revelation. The rush of modernity is a temporary deviation from the revered stasis of Canterbury Cathedral.

With *Colonel Blimp*, however, the motion of the opening sequence, as its motor cycles race to London, is coded as an exciting and very modern dynamism (if the big band jazz sound which accompanies does tend to mark this speed as a modern, American import). An immediate contrast is thus set up between the urgent generation of young male soldiers and the apparently slothful complacency of the sweating Old Guard in the Turkish Baths. The film records Clive Candy's own 'culture shock' albeit one borne out of longevity rather than emigration, and as such it might be seen to contradict the apparent nostalgia of *A Canterbury Tale*, moving as it does towards the rejection of rosy, cosy antiquarianism. Yet what each of these films actually endorses a healthy relationship with the past. They voice, conservatively, a need for guarded

change. Thus the resolution of *Colonel Blimp* sees the demolition through bombing of Clive's London home. For too long the site of his evasion of modernity, his nest is violently removed. Like his friend Theo, he too becomes paradoxically exiled from his private quarters. Deprived of his unhealthily escapist retreat the film offers him the public space of the London street, and its decisively affirmative conclusion literally salutes the march of time, the stark reality of modern warfare and the death of Blimpishness. This is his new anchor. He sheds the worst of his nostalgia and embraces the contingencies of the present, just as Colpeper is brought to admit the outdated errors of his rampant misogyny through his own pilgrimage to Canterbury. Of course, the insistence on public space and on a shared communal ethos (part of the rhetoric of the 'People's war') might be seen to run contrary to one over-riding image of the Romantic hero: the individual, retreating into a private, inner space. What we have in *Blimp* (as in other films more wholly voicing the characteristic sentiment of British National cinema during the war) is a re-figuring of the Romantic individual into the idealised group, and by extension a valorisation of public over private space.

If the sense of 'Home' becomes more emphatic in rapidly developing societies, it is entirely to be expected that it should have achieved such dominance in the wartime films of the Archers. Previous eras and other cultures have, of course, illustrated a similar tendency towards idealising the known and the familiar. Think of Dickens' symbolic use of the house in a Victorian society experiencing profound flux. As Alvin Toffler has remarked in his encyclopaedic survey of so-called 'future-shock', "the syrupy glorification of home reached, perhaps, a climax in nineteenth-century England at precisely the time that industrialisation was uprooting the rural folk and converting

them into urban masses.”³¹ Such nostalgic conservatism engendered by violent socio-political convulsion, displacement and apparent breakdown is not necessarily to be equated to a reactionary commitment to the past or a simple flight from the present. Often it is merely a sign of social conflict brought inevitably by a readjustment to the present. In the westerns of John Ford there is often a similar play between the dynamism of the frontier and the need to domesticate it. This tension is often expressed spatially, famously so in the contrast between the interior of the Edwards’ homestead in *The Searchers* (1956) and the exiled wilderness beyond its doorway into which is sent the sacrificial Ethan (played by the personification of the frontier, John Wayne). With Pressburger, his familiarisation with his new environment is written into the works, with the quirkiness, the paradoxes and the strangeness of the ‘alien territory’ allowing scope for his imagination. In both Pressburger and Ford, of course, the sense of ‘home’ is implicated with the imagining of a nation - Ford poeticises the European settlement of a new continent, while Pressburger reacts to his own accommodation within a new country. The rhetoric of national ideology powerfully offers a safe haven to the alienated, and is all the more persuasive when historical turmoil has maximised the sensation of displacement. Anthony D. Smith remarks that it is through a sense of national identity that “we are enabled to know ‘who we are’ in the contemporary world. By rediscovering that culture we ‘rediscover’ ourselves, the ‘authentic self’, or so it has appeared to many divided and disoriented individuals who have had to contend with the vast changes and uncertainties in the modern world.”³²

³¹ Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (Pan Books Ltd: London, 1971), p. 90.

³² Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (Penguin: London, 1991), p. 17.

Entrance to the new world (even if it is a new world of Old(e) England, as in *Canterbury Tale*) finds the immigrant stimulated by new signs. Sights and sounds can be riddled with an uncertainty which at times verges on the surreal. This is very much the experience of Sergeant Bob Johnson on his arrival in Chillingbourne: he is as unfamiliar with the modern British telephone system as he is with the archaeology of the area and the significance of Canterbury Cathedral (his sense of estrangement is expanded upon in Chapter 3.2). His reactions are mirrored by those of Joan Webster, entranced in the Hebrides, even by Bob Trubshaw, a lost boy seeking a familiar face in an austere monochrome Heaven. Each wants to belong. Viney Kirpal's study of expatriate novels from the Third World identifies a typical dynamic of uprootedness and resettlement, noting "a transition from a familiar frame of reference and relationships to an alien set of references and relationships ... It (expatriation) calls for an almost total break from the traditional environment that one is used to from birth ... It calls for a reorientation of the entire social being of man."³³ For Pressburger, the new cultural identification is grafted at a timely historical moment, when his own search for an identity with a social dimension coincided with the necessary recalibration of national characteristics, brought about through the mobilisation of a total war and the cultural retrenchment which this involved.

However, the glorification of Britain which Pressburger often makes us face is characteristically qualified. It is at once homely, wonderful, outmoded, infuriating, parochial, neurotic. John Ellis has put forward a brief but perceptive sketch of Pressburger's personality which the texts undeniably support. Noting his "uneasy status" in Britain, Ellis suggests that Pressburger "loved the place; yet he feared

³³ Viney Kirpal. *The Third World Novel of Expatriation* (Sterling Publishers Private Ltd: New Dehli. 1989). p. 45.

absorption just as much as he desired acceptance. As a result he gave us a series of awkward fictions, exposing raw feelings and ambivalences whose existence the British would rather not acknowledge.”³⁴ Ellis is speaking here primarily of *The Small Back Room* (1949) which he reads rightly as an unaccommodatingly direct exposé of British sexual and social mores, but the same might be said of those films which directly address themselves to the state of the nation at war.

There is nevertheless a profound sympathy between the ‘British National Cinema’ of the Home Front, re-establishing as much of it did a set of norms and values coded as vigorously English and (despite the social upheavals) geared to victory, and the personal experience of Pressburger, the refugee in England seeking roots in a host nation into which he had undeniably absorbed himself rapidly. Of course, Pressburger came to Britain at the very time when the *incorporative* ideology of the nation (the positive image it presented to itself) was particularly powerful. The actual treatment of aliens notwithstanding, his arrival coincides with a broad and inclusively profiled national character. Significantly, films which seem to bear the imprimatur of Pressburger rather than Powell take as their subject this social identity, connected to the home and to the nation, rather than the isolated or egotistical subject. Pressburger’s experience is not cast in the Byronically Romantic form of Powell’s, whose much discussed morbid and narcissistic streak can be read however tentatively into the gothically informed and messianically inspired characters in their works (those played for example by Eric Portman in *A Canterbury Tale* and *49th Parallel* and Anton Walbrook in *The Red Shoes* and *Oh...Rosalinda!!* (1955)). It might be the case that Powell is at his most ‘Powellian’ with *Peeping Tom* (1960), made without the

³⁴ John Ellis. ‘Alien Insight’. *New Statesman and Society*, Vol. 7, 27/5/94, p. 46.

involvement of Pressburger (certainly this is his nearest to an autobiographical *film à clef*). Mark Lewis represents the final obsessive distillation of characteristics already fully formed in Powell's earlier films.

2.4: Questions of Aesthetics

Frank D. McConnell suggests that because the Romantic 'imagination' conceives through 'images', the cinematic medium is itself inherently Romantic.³⁵ Powell's affinity to this visualised ideal is touched upon in his biography. Not only does he confirm that "In (his) films, images are everything"³⁶ but he also stresses the importance of the illustrated magazines of his childhood and teen years, particularly *Punch* and *Strand*, which serialised the Sherlock Holmes stories with illustrations by Sidney Paget. To Powell, "Paget and Arthur Conan Doyle were the parents of the silent film, the sound film, the colour film, TV, video-tape, of all the audio-visual storytelling inventions of the next 90 years."³⁷ This aspect of cinema's history has been overlooked (elsewhere in his biography, he bemoans the neglect which early film serials, as inheritors of this comic book tradition, have received in film histories). Powell's suggestion that these montages of 'attractions' are important antecedents to cinema may well have some validity given the popular appeal common to both. Implicitly his suggestion reminds us of earlier illustrated fusions of word and image - the gothic grotesque of Dickens' pictorial accompaniments and ultimately, of course,

³⁵ Frank D. McConnell. *Film and the Romantic Imagination* (The John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore. 1975).

³⁶ Powell (1992). p. 168.

³⁷ Powell (1992). p. 46.

the visionary poetics of Blake's etched publications - and asks us to consider these as even earlier examples of Romantic word-imagery which may also feed into the cultural heritage of film. It is also perhaps notable that Powell's formative years in the film industry were spent with a master of the broad visual sweep and the silent adventure, Rex Ingram: as an adolescent Powell developed a passion for cinema through the films of the likes of Ingram, Gance and Griffiths: strong Romantic narratives conceived on an epic scale.

What distinguishes the Archers' Romanticism is the notion of a transfigurative art borne out of the interplay between the external world and the subjective imagination, that most reified faculty of Romantic art. About his boyhood enthusiasm for film-making, Powell has written that "the end was art, the end was to tell a story; the end was to go out into the real world and *turn it into a romantic fantasy world where anything could happen*" (my italics).³⁸ This 'transformation' brought about by the dynamic intervention of an imaginative human agency exists, of course, firmly within the European Romantic heritage. It also accords with early theoretical writings about the nature of cinema: such 'classic' statements on the aesthetics of film-making can likewise be shown to be infused with the same fundamentally Romantic spirit.

As J. Dudley Andrew's survey of classic film theories points out, traditional film aestheticians, by whom he refers to the likes of Arnheim, Balazs and Eisenstein, "condemned cinema's crude appeal to actuality. All of them claimed that cinema became an art when man began intelligently to shape this mute material, to transform it."³⁹ Arnheim's *Film as Art*, first published in 1932 (the first pieces translated into

³⁸ Powell (1992), p. 93.

³⁹ J. Dudley Andrew, *The Major Film Theories* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1976), p. 143.

English were published by Faber and Faber in 1933), sets out to establish first principles for the medium based on the findings of gestalt psychology with regard to the perceptive processes.⁴⁰ Gestaltists suggest that vision is not a matter of mechanically recording the outer world, but of the mind creatively organising or transforming sensory raw material. The imaginative subject thus interacts with and structures the signifiers he/she encounters. Part of this very patterning procedure is the notion that the work of art “is not simply an imitation or selective duplication of reality but *a translation* of observed characteristics into the forms of a given medium.”(my italics)⁴¹ As the title of Arnheim’s collection makes clear, film should be treated as art. Its images must not be treated as reality. As with the Romantics, art is creative, not just reflective or reproductive. This is the material aspect of Arnheim’s theory: however much film may work as an illusion of ‘reality’, the medium *also* draws attention to its own condition as a mode of representation, and the sophisticated viewer always remains partially alert to its filmic condition. Arnheim’s film art, as J.Dudley Andrew succinctly notes, “is a product of the tension between representation and distortion. It is not so much a window as a prism.”⁴²

‘Illusion’ is a term which needs to be pinned down. For Bazin, the concept can be taken to suggest ‘transparency’ - for the reason that we see through the film to the real world, to the pro-filmic event. In the context of the Archers, however, illusionism means rather the expressive creation of a *trompe l’oeil* impression of reality - and

⁴⁰ Arnheim studied at the Psychological Institute of the University of Berlin under the founders of Gestalt psychology. Max Wertheimer and Wolfgang Kohler.

⁴¹ Rudolf Arnheim. *Film as Art* (Faber and Faber: London, 1983). p. 12.

⁴² Andrew. p. 31.

decisively this impression calls in part upon the active imagination of the viewer.⁴³ It is this clear demotion of the empirical component which severs the Archers from the Bazinian position. In adaptations of two novels of Rumer Godden the contrast could not be more obvious. Bazin's defence of Renoir's naturalist-realist style (exemplified in his version of *The River* (1951)) clearly stands in polar opposition to the highly artificial 'psychological realism' of the Archers' *Black Narcissus*. The form of illusionism which the Archers offer is precisely that which Arnheim promotes: it is at once a false impression of reality calculated to delude its viewer, and at the same time a clearly circumscribed parade of technical prowess relishing its own status as a medium. The viewer accommodates the claims of narrative cohesion and of the isolated image, enjoying a sophisticated double-relationship with each (this relationship with the image is expanded upon in Chapter 5.1, when the rhetoric of the so-called 'cinema of attractions' is examined in the context of Powell and Pressburger's post-war melodramas).

Contemporary film theory is defined by its antagonistic attitude to a certain sense of illusionism, and a rejection of Arnheim's actively engaged viewer. Directing their politically charged critical analysis to the ideological operations of Hollywood cinema in the main, theorists such as Colin MacCabe and Laura Mulvey advocate foregrounding the material nature of film as a radical exposé of dubious illusionism. Summarised by Leger Grindon, "For over two decades the film image under the guise of spectacle has assumed the character of the damned," and the cinematic 'show' has been constructed as something irredeemably corrupt.⁴⁴ Metacinematic devices, and

⁴³ A critical interrogation of the terms 'transparency' and 'illusion' can be found in Gregory Currie, (1996) 'Film, Reality and Illusion', in David Bordwell & Noel Carroll (eds) *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (University of Wisconsin Press: London, 1996).

⁴⁴ Leger Grindon, 'The Role of Spectacle and Excess in the Critique of Illusion,' *Post Script*, Vol. 13 No. 2, Winter/Spring 1994, p. 37.

ways of breaking up the neatly sutured relationship between the smooth Hollywood text and its audience, are (for many theorists of the left) the favoured and advocated methods of escaping the straitjacket imposed by classic text's positioning of the unresisting subject. Only through such alienation effects will the viewer be prompted into activity. Eager to expose and to stress the ideological interpellation which the cinematic apparatus strives for, psychoanalytical theories of the gaze have anaesthetised their imagined spectators. Watching films becomes analogous to dreaming. The cinema auditorium becomes, metaphorically, Plato's cave - a frequently invoked parable proposing for rhetorical purposes that the spectator is utterly ignorant of any distinction between illusion and reality. While this premise has its function (particularly when it is directed to critiquing the seemingly normative output of patriarchal, white, heterosexual, family-oriented, American, capitalist cinema), it is always necessary to stress that the delusions offered by Hollywood - and elsewhere - are only delusions where the ability to discriminate between film and reality is utterly absent. Otherwise the hypothesis cannot be sustained.⁴⁵ As V.F. Perkins has pointed out, in the cinema "emotional reactions may be strongly invoked ... (but) intellect and judgement are never completely submerged. The subconscious does not take complete charge of the film-dream as it does of the real one. Part of our mind remains unengaged with the fantasy."⁴⁶ The pact between viewer and film-maker is a conscious acceptance of the 'rules of the game': a willing suspension of disbelief.

⁴⁵ See D. N. Rodowick. *The Crisis of Political Modernism* (University of California Press: London, 1994). Rodowick's analysis of contemporary film theory finds it in crisis due an impasse arrived at by its construction of popular cinema and counter-cinema as binary opposites. He advocates cultural studies as "the most powerful corrective to the aesthetic formalism of political modernism" (p. xxiv).

⁴⁶ Perkins. p. 140.

2.5: Magic Spaces and Alien Territories

Arnheim allows for a form of “partial illusionism” in which the viewer recognises the nature of his vision and in which the film medium never becomes transparent.⁴⁷ This is exactly the form of non-radical, idealistic spectacle which is often underscored in the films of the Archers. Poised between art-house and popular cinema, their set-pieces send eddies through the smooth current of the narrative (if only through fetishised excess). Yet they rarely operate as anti-illusionist, materialist estrangement effects, for the works remain securely rooted within an idealistic-Romantic mindset. They assume that the collaborative spirit in which they were made has been embraced by the viewer, whose own transfiguring imagination is brought to the cinema to intercede between the worlds of film and reality. They demand a suspension of disbelief and proudly parade their ‘illusory’ nature. I am thinking most obviously of the flamboyant staircase to Heaven in *A Matter of Life and Death* although similar reactions are insisted upon with non-realistic and overtly symbolic shots throughout their work. With Powell and Pressburger, the medium itself is romanticised. Raymond Durnat writing on Powell in 1970 correctly recognised this quality (one of the first critics to reassess the Archers’ work, his contribution nevertheless pre-dates the notoriously belated acknowledgement of Pressburger’s involvement in the works). Thus, “(Powell’s) films ... relate to ... a spectacular cinema which asks the audience to relish the spectacle as such, to a school of ‘Cinema’ which is always exquisitely conscious of not only its cinematic effects but its cinematic nature.”⁴⁸ However much the artifice of *Black Narcissus* is foregrounded,

⁴⁷ Arnheim’s notion of “partial illusion” may be compared with Richard Allen’s cognitivist notion of “projective illusion” which allows for the dual possibility that the spectator may both ‘see’ the illusion and ‘see through’ it. See Allen, Richard. *Projecting Illusion: Film Spectatorship and the Impression of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁴⁸ Raymond Durnat. *A Mirror for England: British Movies from Austerity to Affluence* (Faber and Faber: London, 1970), p. 215.

it operates as an intensification of cinematic illusionism, rather than a deconstruction of it.

A coded illusionism can be seen in the expressionistic/romantic sequences in *The Spy in Black*, *Contraband*, *The Red Shoes*, and the whole of *The Tales of Hoffmann*. Arguably, on the other hand, sequences such as the shooting trophy montage from *Colonel Blimp* and the metacinematic inscriptions which form the basis of Powell's *Peeping Tom* operate in a more Brechtian fashion. In the former, this accords with the satirical anti-heroism of the film (although the distancing is countered by the sympathetic performances of Roger Livesey and Anton Walbrook). In the case of *Peeping Tom*, Powell's boldest adventure in self-reflexivity, the anti-illusionism is entirely congruent with the malicious, game-playing formalism, the *danse macabre*, of the work. Significantly perhaps, the outrage which this film caused can be attributed to the discourse of 'quality realism' still prevalent in British criticism of the 1960s: the moral invective it inspired arose from an ideologically deep-rooted misreading of the film's form, a failure to acknowledge its artifice and a consequent (and yet in its own naïve terms utterly justifiable) horror at the apparently 'real' film content. In Arnheim's vocabulary, those critics failed to treat the film as art. It was a failure of the transfigurative imagination.

What we find repeatedly in the Archers' films is the presentation of 'alternative' areas, cinematic depictions of the subjective space on which so much Romantic literature is centred. There are, for example, the various dramatic spaces occupied by Deborah Kerr in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*. Incarnated successively as Edith, Barbara and Angela, three separate and clearly individuated characters, the device of casting the one actress to play all three allows us also to see her as Candy's idealised woman, as a subjective dream-site of Romantic longing (and more cynically

as an expression of the Englishman's obsessively compulsive and masculinist sexual identity⁴⁹). She is removed from the objective and realistically conceived world. Elsewhere, theatricality itself offers yet another 'magic' world. There are the theatres and the film studio in *The Volunteer* (1943): in this semi-documentary, the transformations of Ralph Richardson back-stage - *in extremis* he is shown blacking up in preparation to play Othello - are fascinatingly connected to the changes which enrolment into the forces successfully and efficiently brings upon his dresser Fred - army training invested with a Puckish alchemy. The theatrical space in *The Red Shoes* becomes explicitly inscribed as Vicky's subconscious, although an uncanny note is injected in the final reel when psychological motivations are cast into doubt by the suspicion that the red shoes are indeed 'possessed'. Motifs deriving from English pastoral drama also recur in the work: in particular, *A Midsummer Nights Dream* figures in *A Matter of Life and Death* (we see it rehearsed by American soldiers, and hear snatches of Mendelsohn's accompanying music on the soundtrack). The same play, of course, provides Powell and Pressburger with the title to their last collaboration as the Archers - *Ill Met By Moonlight* (1957). The pastoral as a ludic space, as a place of potential, of development, of magic - all Romantic notions - is found again in the Kentish weald of *A Canterbury Tale*, with its blackouts and its peculiar magistrate, with its medieval relics and jacked-up caravan (nostalgic fetishes imbued with both personal and cultural significance). From the ruined castle with its magic charm and the mythic whirlpool Corryvreckin in *I Know Where I'm Going!*

⁴⁹ This dramatic device would later be inverted by Luis Buñuel in his *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977) in which the blindly lustful Mathieu (Fernando Ray) fails to notice that his own particular object of desire, Conchita, is played by both Carole Bouquet and Angela Molina: the double casting suggests satirically that sexual fixation operates according to a certain arbitrariness. A similarly morbid confusion of identity lets Kim Novak seem to be both Judy Barton and Madeleine Elster to the deluded James Stewart in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958).

(1945), to the secret chambers in Powell's version of Bartok's *Bluebeard's Castle* (1964, Germany), images of the imagination - also crucially serving as images of cinema itself - are scripted and shot into their films.

Of course, 'art' itself, in the language of the Romantics, is magical. In Raymond Williams analysis:

With the development of the market (brought about through literacy and publishing) came the notion of 'culture' as that which resists the base, the mass judgement. And from this comes the notion of art and the artist as favoured, reified, threatened by the social forces of commodification. Art is therefore a 'magic' space, resisting through its appeals to 'culture'. It is specialized, abstracted from the quotidian. Along with this comes the notion of Art as a 'superior reality'.⁵⁰

This is one of the meanings of the 'magic spaces' in Powell and Pressburger's films: in celebrating cinema's *cinematicity* Powell and Pressburger accord with romanticised notions of the artistic by appealing to the transcendental. Like the myth of the autonomous artist's genius, such idealist appeals to the spirit strive fantastically and mythologically to deny the historical and material specificity of the real.

By focussing on the operations of the Romantic Imagination we ourselves begin to circumvent one of the most solid oppositions in film criticism, that between the twin poles of realism and fantasy (an opposition which, owing to the favoured status of realism among critics of the time has been particularly prevalent in writings on British film of the 1940s). Rather than confronting each other adversarially, realism and fantasy can be seen as differing discourses, mutual corollaries, their boundaries shifting, blurring or coming into focus according to design, mediated by the workings

⁵⁰ Williams. p. 55.

of the imagination. If the imagination is the mental faculty to invent or develop images which enable our cognitive apparatus to comprehend the world, it becomes what William G. Plank concludes to be “the epistemological basis for perceptions of reality.”⁵¹ In this sense all fiction, all film, is illusion. For Arnheim, the film artist “calls into existence magical worlds ... He intervenes in the structure of nature to make quivering, disintegrate ghosts of concrete bodies and space.”⁵² Powell’s wish to transform reality into a ‘fantasy world’ has already been mentioned. What distinguishes these ‘other worlds’ as Romantic is that they are not only magically ‘subjective’ alternatives to the commonplace, but that they are especially favoured, more vital (more ‘real’).

Romantic writers have long struggled with the tension between the need to address the real world and the need to recoil from its empirical certainties; between the need to look inward and the danger of solipsism this entails. The inner world of the individual is of course essential to the more liberal, revolutionary and radical moments of Romanticism. Canonical literary texts of English literary Romanticism such as Wordsworth’s *Tintern Abbey*, Coleridge’s *This Lime Tree Bower my Prison* and, as discussed earlier, Keats’ *Ode to a Nightingale* trace the emotional transitions effected by the imagination on either the memory or the senses. These are celebrations of the imaginative faculty, (although with Keats, the celebration is poised with regret at the loss of self implied by his dissolution into the nightingale song). Alan Menhennet’s survey of the Romantic tendency across Europe makes clear, however, that “as long as the external world has priority over the internal, the romantic potential cannot fully be

⁵¹ William G. Plank, ‘The Imaginary: Synthesis of Fantasy and Reality’ in R. A. Collins & H. D. Pearce (eds), *The Scope of the Fantastic* (Greenwood Press: London, 1985), p. 79.

⁵² Arnheim, p. 113.

realised.”⁵³ In what is an illuminating discussion for any consideration of the Archers’ work, Menhennet takes the distinction between classicism and romanticism, between Enlightenment rationalism and Romantic subjectivism, to establish that the “central Romantic dilemma is that of the relation between spirit and reality.”⁵⁴ This idealistic duality, central to Romantic thought, figures strongly in the Archers’ work. Celtic mysticism defeats metropolitan materialism in the Inner Hebrides; submission to a creed of English pastoralism becomes miraculous in Canterbury; spirituality battles with sexuality whether in the Himalayas or in Hazel Woodus’s two Shropshire suitors; and, definitively, the religion of ballet and the reality of marriage forcibly collide on the Riviera. These films are united in their apprehension of the transcendent (Powell’s forays into Celtic supernaturalism and superstition in *The Edge of the World*, *I Know Where I’m Going!* and *Gone to Earth* (1950) all draw from Romanticism’s appreciation of wild natural terrain as Sublime). They are oriented towards the infinite; they blatantly address the imagination and ‘feelings’ rather than reason (such is the stuff of melodrama, as Chapter 5.1 illustrates).

2.6: Romanticism and the Establishment

In a valuable topography of British cinema, Julian Petley refers to its anti-realist moments as a “Lost Continent”, one which by implication he has discovered and which remains to be properly mapped out. There is a danger, of course, that in charting its hidden features we do no more than romanticise anti-realist film-makers by exaggerating their very status as outsiders. With this in mind Petley sets out the task in

⁵³ Alan Menhennet. *The Romantic Movement* (Croom Helm Ltd: London. 1981). p. 12.

⁵⁴ Menhennett. p. 20.

hand: "It is not simply a question of rediscovery (or rather, in many cases, discovery) but, more to the point, one of redefinition."⁵⁵ Petley's essay was a timely intervention which formed part of a renewed interest in British film. Charles Barr, writing in the same volume as Petley, agrees that "possibly the conventional binary opposition of realist and non-realist is a too rigid one: at any rate, the terms of its application to British film needs reworking."⁵⁶ Perhaps the major beneficiaries of this reworking are Powell and Pressburger.⁵⁷ Belated acknowledgement should not, however, lead us to exaggerate subversive or radical elements in their work. The conservative ideology which Powell and Pressburger often articulate can be drowned out by celebrations of their marginality.

The Romantic impulse has often been a marginal one. The origins of the Romantic Movement itself have been traced by Maurice Cranston to the dispute between Rousseau and Jean-Philippe Rameau over the influx of fresh and exotic Italian operas by composers such as Pergolesi to the settled Parisian circles of the 1750s. This dispute, as Cranston remarks, was between decorum and rebellion: "French music was academic, authoritarian, elitist; Italian music, by contrast was natural, spontaneous, popular, and seemed to obey no fixed rules at all."⁵⁸ Of course, political authority has historically been vested in rationalist thought (William G. Plank goes so far as to assert that "tyrants have a monopoly on reality"⁵⁹). 'Classical virtues' have

⁵⁵ Julian Petley, 'The Lost Continent', in Charles Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema* (B.F.I. Publishing: London, 1986), p. 109.

⁵⁶ Barr, p. 15.

⁵⁷ See, for example, Ian Christie, (ed.) *Powell, Pressburger and Others* (B.F.I. Publications: London, 1978); and Ian Christie, *Arrows of Desire: The Films of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger* (Waterstone: London, 1994).

⁵⁸ Maurice Cranston, *The Romantic Movement* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1994), p. 3.

⁵⁹ Plank, p. 80.

generally held sway. The playing field tilts this way and it has only rarely been otherwise.

While it was usually the fate of Romantic gestures to be seen as radical or subversive counter-movements, during the Victorian era English culture saw the incorporation of a form of Romanticism into the Establishment. Raymond Durgnat finds a Romantic conformity in the “puritan authoritarianism” of late Wordsworth and in Matthew Arnold, and in Kipling, who “perfected that romantic compound of evangelical-imperialist-militarist sentiment which haunted the British imagination.”⁶⁰ Michael Powell, of course, imbibed that compound, and was haunted by “Edgar Wallace, Rudyard Kipling, Rider Haggard and other prolific writers of romance and adventure,”⁶¹ while Emeric Pressburger’s keen acquisition of Englishness followed the example of Kipling’s sentimental mystification of his own mother nation. Romanticism, if domesticated, clearly offers itself to a national or racial purpose.

One of the chief tensions within the broad notion of Romanticism, though, is that it is also often construed as exotic. The Archers’ critical reception was coloured by a suspicion that they often possessed an unhealthy ‘continentalism’. This critical voice forges a significant and time-honoured association between ‘rationality’ and Englishness (and this collision between empiricism and British nationalism can sound both xenophobic and parochial). Paradoxically, much of the Archers’ work seems today to articulate conservative and patriotically governed opinions, particularly some of their wartime output (despite the outcry surrounding *Colonel Blimp*). Of course, the culture of the British Home Front itself expressed a utopian idealism. It was

⁶⁰ Durgnat, p. 206.

⁶¹ Powell (1992), p. 70.

ingrained with a principle of hope: hope of victory in the first instance, although that would translate into the rhetoric surrounding the establishment of the welfare state and the 1945 Labour landslide. What we find in the Archers' wartime output is an idealism which is consistent with their output as a whole, but which during the war (with its patriotic credentials clearly flagged) finds itself flowing *with* the dominant cultural current. A heritage of European influences may well have gothicised Powell and Pressburger's work too much for the tastes of many contemporary critics. Arguably there is a tension between the iconoclastic or eccentric characteristics in their films and the conservative ideology which often informs them. Nevertheless, the hegemonic ideals of wartime are ultimately what govern this period of their careers. Theirs is not, however, a bland compliance: as Section 3 addresses, forms of national culture are subjected to an insightful interrogation. From the mid-forties, their Romanticism is increasingly at odds with the cultural mainstream (although this 'mainstream' itself is less organised around a dominant cultural myth in the post-war re-settlement).

Geoffrey MacNab's detailed history of J. Arthur Rank's involvement in British film shows that the contract which established 'The Archers' company under the umbrella organisation of 'Independent Producers' was as obliging an arrangement as any film artist could have wished for.⁶² Alongside 'The Archers' at 'Independent Producers' were 'Cineguild' formed by David Lean, Ronald Neame and Anthony Havelock-Allen as a splinter group from Fillippo Del Giudice's 'Two Cities', the team of Launder & Gilliat, and Ian Dalrymple's 'Wessex Films'. Rank also controlled 'Two Cities' and 'Gainsborough', and financially supported 'Ealing', while he dominated exhibition and distribution through his acquisition of 'Odeon' and

⁶² Geoffrey MacNab, *J. Arthur Rank and the British Film Industry* (Routledge: London, 1993).

'Gaumont-British'. During their peak years 'The Archers' were therefore a central component in one of the most solidly organised, vertically integrated cinematic industrial machines in the world. Rank did, however, invest in the creative freedom of his writers and directors. As MacNab points out "(Rank's) reluctance to 'cap' his filmmakers allowed Cineguild and the Archers in particular to follow a bourgeois/romantic creed of the creative individual artist ... They were cine-poets, making 'art' films within the mainstream."⁶³ With regard to the infiltration into narrative film-making of documentary realism, MacNab admits this was perhaps the case at Ealing: "but at Two Cities and Independent Producers, the filmmakers were not at all hampered by notions of realism and restraint ... The independent Producers couldn't be constrained by ... Grierson's slightly dour ideological high-mindedness."⁶⁴ The Archers' Romantic ethos was thus for a while allowed to flower, and the patronage they enjoyed from Rank granted them their desired freedom. However, even when signed to the notoriously interfering Alexander Korda, Powell relished his own creative space: "I didn't regard myself as working for Alex; not even with Alex. I had this passion for independence."⁶⁵



⁶³ MacNab, p. 94.

⁶⁴ MacNab, p. 96.

⁶⁵ Powell, (1993), p. 78.

3: CINEMA AND BLIGHTY

Introduction

One of the key concerns of 'Cultural studies' is the way in which subjectivity is constructed and experienced, and how it is mediated through our historical/cultural institutions. Rejecting essentialism, its task is to address how 'identity' is made, and what the consequences of its various formulations are, charting these shifting formulations from the stable identity of the modernist self to the new set of politics embraced by the rubric of postmodernism. This brash postmodern identity is often characterised by its shallowness. A product of a globalized economy, it is a decentred locus selecting and absorbing a surplus of culturally mediated signifiers, a performative set of activities rather than a stable condition. The postmodern 'self' is an unattached, singularly liberated traveller: a conceptual nomad, laying his/her hat never more than temporarily on any one cultural peg, and adopting different guises at will. Film theories, of course, where they embrace this aspect of the postmodern, suggest ways in which cinematic activity either advocates, offers or constructs forms of identity, and the political emphasis we find in such critique varies as much according to the agenda of the theoretical discourse being deployed as to the ideological character of the cinema in question.

The 'modern' self, however, lacks the playful detachment of its postmodern cousin. Hankering after unambiguous connections (and ultimately craving an order and stability based upon a sense of profound truth rather than one of surface frisson), this is an identity bound up with the bonds of nationhood and a sense of home, just as its postmodern counterpart is linked to the uncategorised and unregulated global

marketplace. 'National identity' as such, is a product of modernity. It is not just that the high water mark of nationalism coincides with the modern era, but the very anxieties regarding difference, borders and homogeneity which distinguish nationalism are married to that longing for ontological security which is at the heart of the modern self. The nation *can* offer just that sense of order.

Other identities, of course, might depend upon class, gender, region, religion, sexuality, age, ethnicity, language and so on, and the pluralistic tenets of multi-culturalism allow for the co-existence of these points of identification both within and transcending national boundaries. These forms of identity all depend upon the recognition of shared characteristics, and upon a sense of belonging to group, however that group is defined. 'National identity' - a sense of citizenship or subjecthood - is what ties a people together, and while border disputes and internal dissent clearly mark sites of ideological friction it is nevertheless the aim of nationalism to foster a psychological identification with its ideally "imagined community."¹ More than a question of geography then, there is a crucially psychological dimension to 'national identity'. Moreover, it might be stated that it is during times of cultural crisis that the ties of patriotism are more keenly felt, the individual experience of alienation recuperated through the articulation of a common strength. As has been persuasively argued, "it is through a shared, unique culture that we are enabled to know 'who we are' in the contemporary world. By rediscovering that culture we 'rediscover' ourselves, the 'authentic self', or so it has appeared to many divided and disoriented individuals who have had to contend with the vast changes and uncertainties in the modern world."²

¹ This phrase is taken from the title of Benedict Anderson's study of national identity: *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso: London, 1983).

² Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (Penguin: London, 1991), p. 17.

The concept of a 'national cinema' is deeply implicated with the cultural construction of this sense of national identity. To speak of 'national cinema' is thus to refer to more than the sum of cinematic activity in any country. It is to consider a broadly designated set of strategies, such as the projection of patriotic imagery, the articulation of a shared and ultimately mythic sense of national values, and some imaginative recognition from the cinema audience. Crucially, the paradigm of a 'national cinema' suggests that film is an enunciation, a rhetorical mode of address entirely implicated with the circulation of a national story. Its hypothesised spectator is thus less an ahistorical 'space' and more a culturally placed citizen, called upon to admit an inclusive kinship with his/her co-patriots and to share in recognising familiar cinematic codes and landscapes. This is clearly the case with the so called 'British National Cinema' of the Second World War period. Intimately involved with the promotion of a sense of nationhood, and fostering a motivated population by addressing the subject-as-citizen, it works to rein in and to steer the spectator. In accordance with government guidelines, the cinematic apparatus here traffics the specific imperatives of the war effort - public morale, civil defence, education and so on. It articulates a sense of 'us' - by emphasising the common purpose and the solidarity of the so-called 'People's War', by raising consciousness, and by denying the existence of internal social conflicts of class or gender.³ British feature production in general, and more specifically the realism of the documentary movement, was thus an integral part of Home Front culture.

With this complex set of activities in mind, it would clearly be too reductive to chart the ways in which British cinema merely 'reflects' its host society. Obviously where

³ A detailed examination of the ideological contradictions illuminated by this elision of gender difference in the name of national unity is to be found in Antonia Lant, *Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Cinema* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1991). For an argued account of the disparity between the myth of war unity presented in Jennings' films and the reality of class interests during the war, see Andrew Britton, 'Their Finest Hour: Humphrey Jennings and the British Imperial Myth of World War Two', *CineAction!*, no.18, Autumn, 1989, pp. 37-44.

our cinema has adhered most strongly to the tenets of realism a recurring set of images depicting familiar (if highly selective) social conditions are clearly and necessarily to the fore. But to focus on such realistic texts exclusively as social phenomena would be to don a straitjacket. As Andrew Higson and Steve Neale have pointed out, analysing the issue of 'national cinema' involves asking a range of questions, amongst them: "What is the relationship between cinema and national identity? What role does the cinema play in the construction of nationhood? (and) ... of what use is it to speak of an homogenous 'British cinema'?"⁴ Approaches such as these focus upon ideological faultlines, on persuasion and resistance, on circulations of fantasy and emotional investment. Unlike crudely reflectionist criticism, they are not limited to the diagnosis of social problems which certain texts seem to articulate. The widening of the debate proposed by Higson and Neale opens a rich field of hitherto neglected films to a range of promising theoretical avenues. From the realist perspective, of course, Powell and Pressburger's important strain of Romantic gothic was perceived as being oppositional to the dominant social practise, by virtue of its focus on private experience, overtly aestheticised. The accusation that they simply ignore the social dimension is implicit. As a result of this simplistic prescription of how the cinematic apparatus works, Powell and Pressburger were historically severed from the critically lauded mainstream, despite the status of some wartime work which directly addresses issues of national importance and which sees cinema as having a specifically public use. A more pluralistic model of cinematic functioning explores how meanings are produced within popular and art-house cinema, teasing out signification where the realistic and the fantastic, the social and the psychic, intersect. This approach takes into account the material conditions of the industrial base,

⁴ Andrew Higson and Steve Neale, 'Components of the National Film Culture', *Screen*, vol.26 no.1, Jan/Feb. 1985, p. 2.

and works to place the psychoanalytical concept of cinematic desire into a material and ideological context.

It should not be forgotten that however much we may be tempted to institutionalise film production during the period, the concept of a 'national cinema' may too easily become monolithic. Given the dispersed location of cinematic 'authorship', the corporate structure of production financing and the potentially international nature of marketing and distribution, we may wish to interrogate the very validity of a term such as 'national cinema' altogether. Even during the war, a mix of films were made, from comedies deriving either from (working class) music hall or (middle class) west end theatre, to romantic melodramas, from spy dramas, war films and recruitment propaganda, to documentaries focusing on the state of the nation. It is necessary in the case of each of these to assess the significant conflicts between genre, auteur and more nationalistic imperatives, and to measure the degree to which work exhibits a complicity with prevailing official doctrine. Finally, it should not be overlooked that even during the zenith of domestic film production British screens have played host to a predominantly American product, and that the reception of these Hollywood films is as much a part of the national cinematic culture.

At this stage a paradox might be pointed out. The construction of subjectivity along national lines (necessarily implying some imaginative identification with a shared or pooled experience) demands the partial negation of the *individual* self, as personal liberties are surrendered or curtailed to advance the interests of the nation at large. As a result, there is a clear tension between the privately conceived Romantic notion of the autonomous identity, and the shared public dimensions of national identification. An uneasy mediation takes place between the maintenance of this individuated subjectivity and the abandonment of it which is inherent in group identification. The cohesion of this

exemplary group might well be thought of as the governing cliché of British wartime cinema, devoted as it is, by definition, to recruiting and marshalling a disciplined (and willingly self-sacrificial) population. Accordingly, the idealism associated with the Romantic, existential hero is transferred onto the image of the mythically united group.

If we turn our attention to Powell and Pressburger's much vaunted 'Romantic' credentials (often noted as a marker of dissidence) we might expect to find strongly counter-hegemonic trends in their work, indicating their resistance to the socially construed forms of identity advocated by the dominant national cinema. Certainly, of course, some of their wartime output was criticised for its apparent deviation from what was thought proper (and this critical disparagement has gone a long way to fuelling subsequently exaggerated reports of Powell and Pressburger's subversiveness). It is my contention, however, that Powell and Pressburger have no difficulty in upholding a conservatism which is in, the last instance, entirely consistent with the mainstream ideology of their time. That this is the case is less because of an abandonment of their own ideals, but more because during wartime a set of fundamentally idealistic values came to achieve centrality. The nation gave itself narratives of aspiration. These values accorded with Powell and Pressburger's own utopian, Romantic tendencies. Often rooted in a sentimental attachment to both the past and to pastoral imagery, these sanctioned ideals can be read as the resurrection or revitalisation of an older reactionary mind-set, refreshed and respun for the conditions of war. Clearly there was cultural currency in many of these pastoral and nostalgic images, given the importance to the war effort of efficient farming and national self sufficiency, given the topicality of both evacuation and the Land Army, and given the need to re-present familiar depictions of the nation to both the home audience and to American and Commonwealth allies. As Chapter 3.2 explores

in the context of *A Canterbury Tale*, such pastoralism also accorded with a dominant strain in English post-Victorian arts and culture.

One important dynamic of 1940s cultural activity was invested in making active once more the bond between the English and their national identity. As Jeffrey Richards and Anthony Aldgate have illustrated: “the war brought into sharp focus the meaning of England and Englishness. The result was a spate of books analysing and investigating England and the English.”⁵ The cinema played its part too. What binds together much of the output from British studios at the time is the intimately intertwined relationship between romanticised, generally idealised narratives and a strong ideological message. Whether faith is invested in the British people, in selected historical heroes, or in the landscape itself, repeatedly we find utopian structures of feeling committed to the governing tenets of the dominant ideology (utopian feelings which, we might plausibly argue, were founded in the consensual party politics of the war period and were to be translated into both the high purpose of the Beveridge Report and the aspirations of the nascent Welfare State).⁶ Arguably a wide range of films from the documentary movement to the work of Powell and Pressburger is bound together by a shared sense of Romantic idealism more than it is separated by stylistic idiosyncrasies.

In his essay ‘Reification And Utopia in Mass Culture’, Fredric Jameson has theorised how many such works of mass culture have played what he determines to be this very significant double-game. “The drawing power of a mass cultural artefact,” he suggests, “may be measured by its twin capacity to perform an urgent ideological function

⁵ Jeffrey Richards & Anthony Aldgate, *Best of British: Cinema and Society* (Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1983), p. 45.

⁶ There is insufficient space here to offer a representative, let alone comprehensive, catalogue of writings on ‘British National Cinema’ of the war period. The following are all notable: Richards & Aldgate (1983); Jeffrey Richards and Anthony Aldgate, *Britain Can Take It: The British Cinema and the Second World War* (Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1986); and in particular, Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios* (Studio Vista: London, 1993).

at the same time that it provides the vehicle for the investment of a desperate Utopian fantasy.”⁷ It is thus that Jameson, after Gramsci, theorises the subject’s apparently paradoxical acquiescence into a system which mystifies, falsifies and perpetuates a set of invidiously dominant class structures. For Jameson, ideology must have an appeal. It is a rhetoric of persuasion. Hegemony’s wish to lead, of course, relies upon disciples willing to follow. As such, the ‘ideology’ which he speaks of is not a bound set of parameters setting out a limited, repressive and utilitarian manifesto. At its core there is something excessive, a promised surplus of meaning. The emancipation to which the subject aspires is the reward for his/her recruitment (and for Jameson, the utopianism of the text waits to be identified and can be used to critique present social conditions). It is this sense of boundless resource which renders the Jamesonian ideology inherently idealistic.

Both *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* and *A Canterbury Tale* are actively utopian and ideological. The former sets out what qualities are needed for the modern army: it endorses the values articulated by both Spud and Theo, suggesting that ruthlessness, enterprise and goal-oriented clear-sightedness are required to defeat Nazism. However, the film’s ultimate complicity with the hegemonic national ideology is problematised, for it offers as one of its protagonists a deeply sympathetic example of the dismissed and despised old officer class, drawing on a nostalgic identification with the avuncular Clive Candy. The chief tension in the film (or, according to some reviewers of the time, its chief *fault*) is marked by the difficult negotiations between these two sets of values. With *A Canterbury Tale*, we are offered a national identity, motivated in the war effort and anticipating victory through unity. In tandem with this, the text also offers the promise of magical blessings and self-fulfilment with the transcendental tone of its closing reel. Indeed, this might be regarded as a devoutly religious film, such is the intensity with

⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (Routledge: London, 1990), p. 33.

which it focuses upon the significance of the various pilgrimages to Canterbury. Its chief image, that of the cathedral itself, both sets a realistic milieu and at the same time is presented as a metaphor for all the utopianism the film hopes for.

Such then are some of the characteristics of the 'National Cinema' in Britain during the war. The very 'national' aspects of this cinema might be typified by what it is that makes it distinctive from foreign cinemas. When Britain's nearest approximation to an avant garde cinema developed, it situated itself in opposition to both Hollywood and the domestic commercial cinema not by copying European styles, but by developing a realist documentary style along the lines initially laid down by John Grierson (but developed along more poetic lines by the likes of Cavalcanti and Humphrey Jennings). Arguably it was to this school of publicly funded, 'respectable' film-making that the intellectual elite was drawn. Powell and Pressburger, when they are most strongly expressing the patriotic messages of the war effort, share characteristics with the documentary movement (particularly, as will be argued, with Jennings), despite the commonly made clinical differentiation between their work and Grierson's movement; while their efforts to establish a distinctive non-Hollywood cinema of their own took them towards the Continent, with its own non-realist traditions and its Romantic aesthetic.



3.1: Playing with Soldiers: Sentiment and Satire in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*

"When, amid the blasts of hell, the towel is torn aside, the secret places of the heart are revealed." Low's Political Parade, 1936

3.1.1: Ambiguity or Inconsistency

The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp arguably evoked as much confusion (or scandal) as any other production of the Archers company. Famously, its pre-production period was beset by problems, not least the efforts of Churchill to stop it being made, and the refusal of the War Office to release Laurence Olivier from the Royal Navy to play the role of Clive 'Sugar' Candy. Its export was for a while hampered and, and by the time of its release it was known as the film 'they' tried to ban. The subsequent publication of the Sidneyan Society pamphlet *The Shame and Disgrace of Colonel Blimp*, which declared the film to be the product of rampant pro-Nazism, has helped to fuel its mythical status and bolster its reputation as a *rogue* film. Yet its makers were clear in their intent: in a letter to the War Office sent early in 1942, Powell sets out his message: "Englishmen are by nature conservative, insular, unsuspicious, believers in good sportsmanship and anxious to believe the best of other people. These attractive virtues which are, we hope, unchanging, can become absolute vices unless allied to a realistic acceptance of things as they are, in modern Europe, and in Total war."¹ Leaving aside Powell's assessment of the British character (one which echoes the Jewish émigré Pressburger's idealisation of his adopted homeland), there seem to be little real grounds today on which to judge the film to be anti-

¹ Ian Christie (ed.). *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (Faber & Faber: London, 1994), p. 28.

patriotic. Indeed, given the close allegiance between documentary realism and propaganda in the critical discourse of the time, Powell's advocacy here of "*a realistic acceptance of things as they are*" can be read as a rejection of his customary mode of Romantic fantasy in favour of an empirically motivated cinema. It is indicative of the extent to which this film is in fact saturated by the urgencies of wartime ideology. Nevertheless, there are real tensions in the film. It brings into collision some very different discourses, and as a result, confusion remained. The *Observer* critic C. A. Lejeune (13/6/43), in a typical review, praised the film as "a work of quality," but asked the question "what is it about?"² To date she awaits a satisfactory answer, for subsequent writers have done little more than nod to so-called although often undefined 'ambiguities' in the text: typically, Kevin Macdonald detects "a deep ambivalence,"³ and deems it to be "a hot-house of contradictions,"⁴ while Douglas Johnson remarks on the blend of satire and sentimentality in the film.⁵ Perhaps slightly more positively, Marcia Landy suggests it "makes accommodations to the populist rhetoric of the time while still preserving a fascination with the past,"⁶ while Ian Christie aptly notes it is "distinctly ambivalent in its attitude to establishment values."⁷ Again,

² For a comprehensive collection of reviews, see B.F.I. microfile on *Blimp*. Reviews and other papers relating to *Blimp* have been conveniently collected in Christie (ed.), 1994.

³ Kevin Macdonald, *Emeric Pressburger: The Life and Death of a Screenwriter*, (Faber & Faber: London, 1994), p. 208.

⁴ Macdonald, p. 228.

⁵ Douglas Johnson, 'Was Blimp Wrong?', *New Society*, Vol. 73 no.1177, 19th November 1985, p. 92.

⁶ Marcia Landy, *British Genres: Cinema and Society 1930-1960* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, N. J. & London, 1991), p. 150.

⁷ Ian Christie, *Arrows of Desire: The Films of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger*, (Faber & Faber: London, 1994), p. 47.

noting the artificiality and bizarreness of the film, Sarah Street suggests that *Blimp* “is a good example of a hybrid war film which conforms to notions of consensus but, at the same time, suggests a sort of anarchic abandon at its achievement, which in turn threatens the stability of that consensus.”⁸ Valid points are being made here, suggesting the need to account for real and deliberate tensions in the text, and to explore how far this ambiguity is symptomatic of the film’s attempt to accommodate pertinent ideological conflicts. We might view *Blimp* as a manipulative exercise, a sharp satire of the military mind-set smoothed over with a lubrication of indulgent tenderness. In this respect it meets Fredrick Jameson’s utopian/ideological criteria for works of mass art (as discussed in the Introduction to this Section). This ‘double game’ goes some way to account for the contradictoriness which critics have detected. The film’s title makes specific the reference to David Low’s caricature of ‘Colonel Blimp’, and seems to emphasise its satirical credentials. Low wrote of his Colonel that he was intended to typify “the current disposition to mixed-up thinking, to having it both ways, to dogmatic doubleness, to paradox and plain self-contradiction.”⁹ The ideological purpose of the film seems to be explicit: to expose flaws within the British officer class system. Such flaws had been recognised elsewhere. In *The Lion and the Unicorn*, George Orwell’s assessment of the national scene written during the war, historical shifts in the country’s power structure are noted, and the point is made that the decay of the old ruling class in the inter-war years had been accompanied by a wilful blindness to reality among that class: “They (the ruling class) could keep society in its existing shape only by being *unable* to grasp that any improvement was possible. Difficult though this was, they achieved it,

⁸ Sarah Street, *British National Cinema* (Routledge: London, 1997), p. 55.

⁹ Colin Seymour-Ure & Jim Schoff, *David Low* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1985), p. 136.

largely by fixing their eyes on the past and refusing to notice the changes that were going on around them.”¹⁰ Such myopia, of course, is to be found in Powell and Pressburger’s film. Orwell’s judgement is that the Blimps “are not wicked, or not altogether wicked (but) they are merely unteachable.”¹¹ The Archers do not entirely accept this: Clive Candy does learn to face reality (although he does so belatedly). This is his personal epiphany. In the degree to which Clive is a representative of the military class, his transformation indicates that in the last instance the Archers have some faith in the ruling order: it is certainly part of the rosily affirmative conclusion to the film that Clive is regenerated, although in this the Archers merely echo the generally positive tone of wartime national discourse. Orwell too was unable to resist expressing some idealistic longing: “Patriotism and intelligence will have to come together again,” he concludes. “It is the very fact that we are fighting a war, and a very peculiar kind of war, that may make this possible.”¹²

Some of the much criticised ambiguity in *Blimp* derives from a failure to recognise the way in which the film carefully makes use of the Blimp type. Although it sets out to disparage his class, the film draws back from damning its individualised representative: Candy the affectionate father figure is never entirely dislodged. Ultimately the individual is reinvigorated, and the audience is thus allowed to savour the pleasure of Candy’s excessively sentimental world-view while being educated about the need to face the exigencies of war.

The interest in interrogating and refashioning Britishness is typical of the time, of course

¹⁰ George Orwell, ‘The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius’, in *The Penguin Essays of George Orwell*, (Penguin: London, 1984), p. 157.

¹¹ Orwell, p. 159.

¹² Orwell, p. 162.

(Orwell's essay is a much cited contribution). *Blimp*'s curious amalgam of socially purposive propaganda and flights of fancy, of public history and private memory, of realism and romance (played out against a real backdrop of Whitehall in-fighting surrounding the production and release of the film) directly challenges the critical fraternity's oft-vaunted distinction between documentary and fantasy. By examining how far *Blimp* is permeated by the values of the dominant national ethos, and how far it offers up resistance, its status as a national 'epic' may be evaluated. The domestic cinema of the wartime period deployed itself to mobilise a sense of patriotically inflected common purpose, recruiting subjects by offering points of identification designed to capitalise upon the recognition of a shared and stable sense of nationhood (effacing differences of gender, class, and race). This not insignificant ideological mission cannot easily be shouldered. Recent criticism, for example, has noted how the attempted denial of gender difference (signified in reality by the wartime conscription of women into erstwhile male provinces) set ripples coursing through calm patriarchal waters. *Blimp* itself is concerned with the changing role of women in society. It questions the immortality of Blimpishness and by extension the ways in which the reactionary outlooks associated with David Low's figure struggle to deny the fluidity of all forms of social change, including that of female emancipation.

Caricatures are, by definition, fixed and two-dimensional exaggerations. "The aim of the caricaturist" in David Low's words, "is to discover, analyse and select essentials of personality, and by the exercise of wit to reduce them to appropriate form."¹³ Low concedes, however, that "the caricaturist for the Press is urged to think of the sentimental disposition to hero-worship on

¹³ David Low, *Ye Madde Designer*. (The Studio Ltd.: London, 1935), p. 10.

the part of the 'Constant Reader' and 'Regular Subscriber'. He compromises with kindness."¹⁴ David Low's suggestion of self-censorship suggests a less agreeable relationship with his employer than was actually the case. The left-wing New Zealander Low, who arrived in Britain in 1919, may well have worked for the right-wing Express Newspapers, but its maverick proprietor Max Aitken (the 1st Lord Beaverbrook) prided himself on his iconoclasm and gave his star cartoonist as much latitude as he could have wanted. Thus Low found himself working alongside other such radical writers on the *Evening Standard* as Aneurin Bevan, Michael Foot and A. J. P. Taylor. Nevertheless, the licensed fool knows when to exercise restraint, and in their film about Blimpishness Powell and Pressburger soften their satire even further, fleshing out and mollifying Low's caricature into the more genial Clive Candy. Blimp's catch-phrase "By gad Sir, Lord Prendergast was right!" is therefore given to Candy in the shooting script, but is deleted from the film, putting a distance between Candy and his crasser two-dimensional cousin.¹⁵ Other changes are made to make the film more palatable. During the First World War sequence, the intimidation and murder of German prisoners, explicit in the script, is lessened to an uncomfortable implication.¹⁶ Theo's militarism is downplayed. In the shooting script, he clicks his heels as he arrives to plead against his internment as an alien; in the film he is dishevelled, tired, vulnerable.¹⁷ Pressburger's early manuscript outline of the film suggests that Theo should tell us at this point that his wife Edith committed suicide in Germany five years earlier: this suggestion

¹⁴ Low, p. 16.

¹⁵ See Christie (ed.), p. 251.

¹⁶ See Christie (ed.) p.p. 192-195.

¹⁷ See Christie (ed.), p. 246.

does not make it as far as the shooting script.¹⁸

Although at times the film seems to deny the degree to which it identifies with the Blimp, the newspaper cartoon nevertheless remains a key reference point. It has been suggested that Powell and Pressburger's audience for *Blimp* would have been largely blind to the allusion to Low's Colonel. Douglas Johnson argues this¹⁹, as does Ian Christie, who feels, plausibly that "the precise point of (the film's) title must have puzzled many provincial audiences who were not too familiar with the cartoon character of Colonel Blimp, a feature of the London *Evening Standard* during the thirties."²⁰ Admittedly, compared with the *Daily Express*, the best selling daily paper in the United Kingdom at the time with a circulation of around 2 million, the *Evening Standard* sold only around 400,000, but as Colin Seymour-Ure and Jim Schoff have pointed out, with syndication to the regions (including local papers in Glasgow, Birmingham, Manchester and Newcastle) Low's cartoons had a circulation of another million or more daily.²¹ World-wide, Low was syndicated to more than 200 newspapers and magazines, and he has been considered to be one of the most influential cartoonists and caricaturists of the 20th century.²² While he had made his first appearance in 1934, Blimp was admittedly a less frequent sight by 1942, yet as vehicle for the film's overt political message, this national type, with his knee-jerk outbursts of reactionary, war-mongering stupidity, seems apparently fixed in the national psyche and securely

¹⁸ The manuscript is published in Christie (ed.). See p. 13.

¹⁹ Johnson. p. 91.

²⁰ Christie (1994). p. 43.

²¹ Seymour-Ure & Schoff. p. 45.

²² Mark Bryant & Simon Heneage. *Dictionary of British Cartoonists & Caricaturists 1730-1980* (Scolar Press: Aldershot, 1994). p. 141.

identified with the film.

Although the film's Clive Candy often seems more gently pliable than his brittle cartoon prototype, others of his military/diplomatic class remain more stereotypically sketched. Roger Livesey's performance must be read as something which cushions the satirical blow. It is tempting to suggest that had Laurence Olivier played the part, as initially envisaged, a more cutting caricature or grotesque parody of a type might well have been offered, locking the presentation of Clive more wholly to Low's cartoon. Livesey's Clive is fundamentally honourable, safer, more comfortable. He fits the part more snugly than the often unsympathetic, coldly intelligent and actorly Olivier might have done. The novelist A. L. Kennedy captures the essence of Livesey's performance precisely and lovingly, commenting on "the sense of softness, humanity and decency ... rooted in Livesey's voice, like non-carcinogenic pipe smoke, like audible cake, like a quintessentially masculine purr."²³ Livesey gives us a palliative, allowing Clive to stand as a reservoir for emotional gratification.

In what is in part Clive's subjectively visualised memoir, his unrealised love for Edith, the triple casting of Deborah Kerr as his 'ideal', and the vibrant colour of his energetic Edwardian flashback sequence suggest a soft romanticised nostalgia at the heart of the film.²⁴ The vibrant *mise-en-scène* of the Edwardian section is clearly and significantly contrasted to the impoverished khaki of the World War sections.²⁵ Nostalgia in the Archers' films is often expressed simply as a fondness for the past, but it is generally symptomatic of a very modern sense of alienation - a

²³ A. L. Kennedy. *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (B.F.I.: London, 1997), p. 51.

²⁴ Deborah Kerr, of course, plays Edith, Barbara and Angela ("Johnny") in the film. Sarah Street erroneously credits Kerr with only two roles, omitting Barbara altogether. See Street, p. 53.

²⁵ A note in the shooting script points to the "deliberate elimination of all colours except for Khaki" in the Flanders sequences. See Christie (ed.), p. 182.

figurative homesickness. Longings for alternative states of being, private epiphanies and subjectively realised other places recur in their work, and occasionally, in the post-war films, a similar sense of aspiration feeds their Wagnerian craving for totality, where colour and high-operatic style return to express a sense of plenitude through the extravagant intensification of cinematic spectacle. Nevertheless, in *Blimp* and in wartime, Clive Candy's idealism is revealed to be misplaced. It is ironically undercut. His notion of good sportsmanship, fine-tuned at Harrow, is exposed as a foolishness, and with the Turkish bath sequence (the only undeniably obvious reference to the *Evening Standard* cartoon, where this was a regular feature) he is caught with his pants down, the Emperor without any clothes. The degree to which his habitual dreaming is rejected as a failing marks the extent to which the film is part of an ideology of public co-operation in the pragmatics of a shared national endeavour. The dictates of war take precedence and Candy's outlook is a childish thing to be put away. However brutal Spud's rude invasion of the Turkish Baths seems to be, it is accepted as a necessary and muscular incursion of *Realpolitik*.

3.1.2: The Emergent and the Residual

As its title proclaims, *Blimp* depicts the "life and death" of a dogmatic belief system - one which has both a vitality and a morbidity. Raymond Williams offers a vocabulary which allows us to address the dynamics of this relationship. He argues against what he calls the "epochal" analysis of a culture, which in seizing upon the cultural process as an abstracted system, runs the danger of defining culture statically, with historical tendencies being given insufficient weight. While retaining the concept of the "dominant", he restores a sense of temporal movement by adding into the equation the terms "residual" and "emergent". With regard to the residual, he distinguishes this from the "archaic" (which is wholly recognised as an element of the past). The residual, by

definition, “has been actively formed in the past, but is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present.”²⁶ The residual may be either alternative to or oppositional to dominant culture, or may have been incorporated partially or fully into the dominant (this incorporation is most likely, Williams finds, “if the residue is from some major area of the past”²⁷). Here, he touches upon the notion of the traditional, for what *is* tradition if not the selective incorporation of either the actively residual or the truly archaic?

Like the residual, the “emergent” can only be considered in relation to the dominant. New meanings and new relationships are continually being created: some are developments within the dominant, others are genuine alternatives or oppositions. Determining which is difficult because of the problem of locating the origin of the emergent - at least the residual can be traced back to a previous culture. What can be stated, though, is that emergent characteristics which are oppositional will trigger the process of attempted incorporation. Critically, the development here is uneven and is “usually made much more difficult by the fact that much incorporation looks like recognition, acknowledgement, and thus a form of *acceptance*.”²⁸ That act of incorporation, of course, is evidence of the dominant group’s struggle to obtain a secure hegemonic hold: the very ‘incorporativeness’ or all-inclusiveness we associate with British wartime cinema is just such a gesture.

Williams concludes from this selective incorporation that “no mode of production and

²⁶ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1977), p. 122.

²⁷ Williams, p. 123.

²⁸ Williams, p. 124.

therefore no dominant social order and therefore no dominant culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy, and human intention.”²⁹ Here Williams displays his credentials as a voice of the liberal left. Modes of domination “select from and consequently exclude the full range of human practice” - in other words, while the dominant seizes the social, it excludes “the personal or the private, ... the natural or even the metaphysical.”³⁰ The dominant culture may therefore be characterised according to the zeal with which it reaches out into hitherto “reserved ... areas of experience.”³¹ In so reaching out, consent is secured and the dominant becomes genuinely hegemonic, successfully containing within itself internal conflicts, variations and oppositions.

What Williams provides here is an active model of the cultural process, not one which depends upon inert metaphors of centrality and marginality. *Blimp* clearly enacts a debate between forces of stasis and dynamism. Its key frictions mark the resistance among sections of society to temporal and social change. What the film therefore diagnoses is a ‘crisis of authority’. Gramsci, finessing his concept of “hegemony or political leadership,”³² sketches the situation thus:

If the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer ‘leading’ but only ‘dominant’ ... this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously, etc. This crisis exists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms

²⁹ Williams, p. 125.

³⁰ Williams, p. 125.

³¹ Williams, p. 126.

³² Antonio Gramsci (ed. & trans. Quintin Hoare & Geoffrey Nowell-Smith), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (Lawrence & Wishart: London, 1971), p. 267.

appear.³³

Blimp negotiates this interregnum, charting the ‘life’ and ‘death’ of the now dogmatic old order, and exposing its wilful blindness to the symptoms of change. It explores the concurrence of the past and the present, through its flashback structure, its treatment of memory and obsession and its resituation of a specifically Victorian mentality into the 1940s, something it achieves by taking the relics of an older genre and placing them in a new cinematic environment. This debate between reactionary and progressive forces is figured musically within the soundtrack. Two military marches, one a jazz tune reminiscent of Glenn Miller, the other a more conventional piece of brassy triumphalism, signify linearity and purpose, and each denotes good health, the former coded as modernity, the latter given a more traditional inflection. The jazz tune which features prominently in the introductory sequence set in 1942, is heard a second time as the extended flashback returns us to the contemporary frame narrative. With the repetition of Spud’s chase to London, we see the tune this time cued diegetically on a juke box, specifying it as a recent popular hit, fittingly one which is associated with the young Spud’s ‘New Model Army’. The other march sympathises with the aged Clive’s re-engagement with and usefulness to the mainstream culture of the modern world, and their shared march time signifies that a reciprocity between old and new is to be achieved. These tunes accompany sequences of energetic progress - the race to London, Candy’s career within the Home Guard depicted with a the montage of *Picture Post* photo-shoots, and the triumphant shift into the major key which brings the film to a close. In contrast, a German waltz tune, introduced to us by Edith as “The Mill Went Round and Round” during the

³³ Gramsci. p. 267.

1902 Café Hohenzollern sequence, tells of closed systems, of fatal circularity and endless repetition: the epic mundane. It too is placed within the diegesis, rooting the tune in 1902 and marking it as one which will come to signify outdatedness. It is first heard being played by the Café orchestra, a tellingly ironic counterpoint as Clive disappoints the radical suffragette Edith by abandoning his adventure to expose the anti-British propagandist Kaunitz. He begins his excuse “I know a chap in our Embassy here. We were at school together...”, and he goes on to explain how diplomatic pressure has brought him to realise the danger of “a possible scandal.” Symbolising a world of old school ties, reactionary fixity, and the purposeless vacuity of social rounds, this music is a deathwaltz. It stands for all the archaic principles the film would reject. We later hear the tune over the montage of snapshots and Embassy invitations in a scrapbook which constitutes almost all we see of Clive’s married life travelling the world, a montage which culminates, of course, with a shot of his wife’s death notice in *The Times* and then with blank album pages. Although each of the montage sequences referred to here is a convenient collapsing or acceleration of time to fit the narrative space, what distinguishes this latter sequence is the direct implication, coded on the soundtrack, that these years of society high-life represent Clive’s failure to develop. Of course, such a reading is given psychological justification too, as Clive’s entire relationship with Barbara is shown, through the casting of Deborah Kerr as both women, to be a re-enactment of his unconsummated first love for Edith.

But to return specifically to Williams’ categories, *Blimp* constructs its Blimpishness as something outmoded, as something to be exposed as a residual force which through the apparent permanence of social relations has retained an active position within the power structure. ‘Blimp’ is forced to learn that the assumption of ‘dominance’ is a refusal to acknowledge the reality that newly emergent and united forces have achieved a stronger hegemonic position, particularly that

as the war needs to be fought for the future, the culture should be investing its hope with the youth of the country (this new hegemony replaces the older and no longer sustainable dominance of Clive's old world). The film goes further, to insinuate, by references to popular myth and fiction, that even the acknowledged significance of the Blimpish class to the past is in part mythical. Candy, in absenting himself from the historical process of development and redefinition, increasingly becomes a figure of old traditions, a dinosaur, and while behind Roger Livesey's good visage he seems harmless, the very *appearance* of harmlessness among the military elite is figured as something paradoxically more dangerous when facing the candid might of fascism. It is part of the film's propagandising agenda to denounce as derelict this aspect of the dominant order. While rendering it archaic, the film also seeks the active incorporation of that which is supportive of the establishment.

To incorporate is to unite into one blended whole, to break down foreign bodies into an undifferentiated compound, to absorb into the flesh. This is very much what was articulated by the so-called "National Cinema" of the War, committed as I have said, to the effacement of difference and the propagation of consensus. Thus we may see, in the film's acceptance of the uniformed Angela within Candy's masculine world, something of the process Williams sets out: the process of hegemony, alert, flexible and ultimately pragmatic in securing its own perpetuity, will tolerate the extension of women's labour into what were previously male arenas, taking care to ensure that the meaning of this shift in social practice is clearly cued as temporary ('for the duration') and is encouraged through popular appeals to the national war effort.

3.1.3: Re-Writing Genres: Quizzing the Epic of Empire

The tapestry displayed behind both the opening and closing credits of *Blimp* operates figuratively as its establishing shot, giving a highly stylised impression of the film's cultural topography. It presents this landscape symbolically, a tableau-pastiche clustering together an anthology of familiar signs which delineate in sketch-form many of the key themes of the film. Its antiquated style of outdated craftsmanship mirrors the survey offered by *Blimp* of a military caste ossified in tradition. In the background, to the right, there are scenes of horsemanship: foxhunting, a lady sitting side-saddle, a game being played (rugby or cricket?): the gentry is connoted: Old-Tory values and stable village life. Like a scene from Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Foxhunting Man*, this is just the sort of rustic Englishness which *A Canterbury Tale* interrogates, and precisely the *olde-worlde* world of good sportsmanship, *noblesse oblige* and disastrous military acumen which the film presents.

Above and behind the Blimp character in the distance, aeroplanes are flying. This jarring temporal collision anticipates the famous shots in the opening prologue of *A Canterbury Tale*, where five hundred years are elided in a match-cut from a Chaucerian falconer's hawk to documentary style footage of a soaring Spitfire. *Blimp*'s tapestry is a spatial rendition of the same creative dialogue between the historical, the mythical and the topical, a collocation of heterogeneous signs, jostling with and against each other. It is also, of course, a dialogue between the past and the present, and significantly, perhaps, the scenes of modernity are placed in the more dominant position, to the left of the picture: the village life to the right being that lifestyle which was swept away with World War One. Mediating between these two scenes is the figure of David Low's Blimp in the centre.

The crest of the Blimp family clearly emphasises the class bias of the film (it focuses almost exclusively upon an elite group, although whether it serves, as Sue Harper asserts, towards the defence of this elite is something we may wish to question).³⁴ The tree on which this heraldic shield is resting - it seems to be an old oak - symbolically conflates longevity and Englishness as twin virtues (and this interest in permanence figured through timber is something which the Archers return to in their next film, *A Canterbury Tale*). The presence of the Archers' own production company trademark on the trunk of the tree happily reinforces the theme. The famous archer's target is itself a piece of medieval iconography, and is at the same time, of course, an allusion to the concentric circles which form the insignia of the RAF. Nailing their logo to an ideologically charged oak, their patriotic colours are clearly staked. But like the visibly underscored inscription of authorship found in the *Canterbury Tale* match-cut, the badge of the Archers woven into the tableau emphasises their status as auteurs whose personal expression is perhaps in dynamic tension with the expectations of national cinema and its recognised genres. To reinforce this marking of authorship, an enigmatically codified sign of Powell himself is stitched into the scene, for, as Nannette Alder has detected, the spoof family crest incorporates motifs of the director's two dogs which stand in for their owner.³⁵ These dogs, cocker spaniels named Eric and Spangler, also make Hitchcock-like cameo appearances in both *I Know Where I'm Going!* and *A Matter of Life and Death*.

As knight errant on his white charger, Blimp is part Don Quixote, part Sir Lancelot, part

³⁴ Sue Harper. *Picturing the Past: The Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film* (B.F.I.: London, 1994) p. 106

³⁵ Nannette Aldred. 'A Canterbury Tale: Powell and Pressburger's Film Fantasies of Britain', in David Mellor (ed.), *A Paradise Lost: The Neo-Romantic Imagination in Britain, 1935-1955* (Lund Humphries: London, 1987), p. 122.

hero of classical Greece, and part indulgent, bloated satyr. Musical motifs from the film also work to establish tone: a mock-heroic scherzo, an elegiac theme (which will connote Clive's lost love) and a military fanfare thus vie for attention. With his multiple connotations, the sign of Blimp begins to cut loose from any stable anchorage. An allegorical figure to be decoded, his personification as Clive Candy is a variable yet to be measured. 'Character', in this film, is something shown to be made, rather than innately given. Blimp is the satirical epitomisation of a type of Englishman (Low occasionally portrayed him as Britannia, and he clearly owes something to John Bull). C.S. Lewis found Blimp "the most characteristic expression of the English temper in the period between the two wars,"³⁶ while Robert Graves offers a mock genealogy, noting that "the oxheaded Saxon strain has always been dominant in the Blimp family", and also joking that "the Elizabethan de Blympe was satirised by Shakespeare as Sir John Falstaff."³⁷ Already the discreet and autonomous meaning of the 'type' is starting to disperse into a range of intertextual sites. Likewise, the brand of history provided by the film is shown to be a pastiche or bricolage. The national character offered is one born out of a collage of historical elements, where identity is a matter of selection, something acquired from a store of available discourses. National identity is not borne out of a set of objective criteria, but derives from a sense of shared cultural depictions. *Blimp* deals in levels of cultural "reality". It intertwines the factual (such as the references to Conan Doyle and J. B. Priestley, and to actual events - the film is fastidiously accurate in this regard³⁸), the fantastical, and the fictional, of which Clive, for this

³⁶ Peter Mellini, 'Colonel Blimp's England', *History Today*, Vol. 34, October 1984, p. 30.

³⁷ Robert Graves, *Occupation Writer* (Creative Age Press: New York, 1942), p. 222.

³⁸ As well as involving important historical periods such as the wars. Candy is shown topically discussing the most recent cliff-hanger in Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, and later we hear J.B. Priestley, a familiar wartime voice on the B.B.C., being introduced as a last minute replacement for Clive's banned broadcast.

is his story, is offered as a coherent and continuous centre. The national profile, according to the strategy of the film, is a composite of disparate parts, and national identity is a matter of imaginative investment. As such, the 'cohesiveness' and the reliability of Clive are shown to be a myth.

Nominally the epic hero, Clive's own subjectivity is itself primarily based upon an identification with stereotypes and idealisations. He is the product of an imaginative and at times desperate investment in adventure, his heroic function donned as if it were a costume. The meticulous pageant of external details, particularly of clothes and uniforms, which forms the cluttered *mise-en-scène* of the 1902 sequence is an expression of this 'performative' quality: Clive is a player strutting and fretting through his life's gaudy drama (and of course, caught napping and naked in the Turkish Baths he seems bereft of authority). Clive is pegged to an iconic repertoire. His name, of course, is an echo of the renowned Imperialist, Clive of India. Aspiring to the Byronic, our Clive dashes to Berlin telling Hoppy to make his excuses to Lady Gilpin: "Say I've gone on some secret mission - make me out the most serious romantic figure" (he promptly sends a postcard back to Hoppy from Berlin signed "Sherlock"); and of course in his first dialogue with Edith she refers to him as Livingstone. He is an accretion of popular heroic types.

*

Cinema audiences, too, locate their desires and establish their sense of selfhood in mobile and fluid forms of identification (these forms being normatively channelled by ideological forces into recognised and admissible categories such as gender, race and nationality). The protagonist of the film often provides the focal point for such identifications. Here, Clive, its supposedly integrated hero, serves as a conduit, binding the viewer into a seemingly endless cultural matrix.

History, fiction and fantasy are thus mediated by the cinematic experience. How successfully then, we might ask, does Clive function as a coherent site? Much of the film, of course, is a flashback, the hermeneutic pretext for which is deeply personal: "You laugh at my big belly, but you don't know how I got it! You laugh at my moustache, but you don't know why I grew it! - How do you know what sort of man I was?" Clive bellows at Spud, "when I was as young as you are - forty years ago - forty years ago..." The flashback, the only obvious method of coding a cinematic past tense, tends to be initiated at character-level, and is thus imbued with a subjectivity: it is private memory rather than public history. It is directly connected to the current, and to the implicitly present 'narrating' individual (while the screened past is, in a sense, also part of the 'here and now'). In *Blimp*, as elsewhere, the flashback paradoxically undermines any sense of sequential temporal progression, because being construed as memory (the very term 'flashback' can be read psychologically) what is displayed is the concurrence of past and present.³⁹ The very continuity of Clive - he is the one thread tracing through the entire film - seductively causes us to identify with him, yet of course, if we look at the memory he gives us, it is one frustrated by elliptical punctuations, galloping accelerations and frozen moments. Time jumps. It pirouettes. There is a constant tension between this fragmented view of the historical and the appearance of constancy offered by Clive's nevertheless sentimental and insulated foolishness. Of course, the film thus problematises any notion of history as smooth narrative, and Clive's inability to accept instances of British foul play in the Boer War or in the First World War satirically undercuts any

³⁹ The very status of the image in flashback is at stake here: what is its veracity? Implicitly what we see is Clive's recollection, spilled out during a night held hostage in the Turkish Baths, although (a) his reliability as a narrator is questionable and (b) clearly some aspects of the visualised spectacle parading as his memory cannot be so. There is also, of course, an ontological question to be answered: in a sense the projected image is always 'in the present' while what it re-presents is always 'in the past'. Such cinematic issues are entirely in accord with the film's problematisation of 'history', 'memory' and 'the past'.

sanitised rendering which might be given in official chronicles.

The text casts Clive in other cultural roles. Collecting his troops to capture Clive ruthlessly and without warning (in imitation of Pearl Harbour) Spud makes veiled allusions to Shakespeare's *Henry V* - his regiment of Taffy, Geordie and others recalls Fluellan, MacMorris and Jamie, while his ironic interpretation that "to make it like the real thing" means to report "our losses divided by ten and the enemy's multiplied by twenty" echoes that play's implausibly accounted outcome of Agincourt. These nods to Shakespeare's histories associate Clive with Falstaff. By the end of the film, the utter rejection of the aged Clive's Blimpishness evokes Hal's repudiation of his own erstwhile compatriot ("I know thee not, old man. Fall to thy prayers. / How ill white hairs becomes a fool and jester!" *Henry IV (II)* (V.v. 47-8)). More intertextual links are made: Spud soon discovers that Angela has "gone to warn the Wizard" and dashes after her. Grabbing his tin hat, he transforms Clive into the sham Wizard of Oz, and invidiously casts himself as that film's heartless pilgrim (*A Canterbury Tale*, considered in the next chapter, is similarly indebted to this work). Like *Blimp*, of course, *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) is a heroic journey whose ultimate quest is "Home". With a broad-brush gesture, the contrast between the military dragoons of Clive's youth, cavaliers in scarlet, and the modern, utilitarian troops in khaki evokes the popular history of the English Civil War, the "New Army" in the final minutes of the film significantly heard marching across the "Cromwell Road". *Blimp* also points to the classics, the film self-mockingly posing as Great Epic. At the opening of the Café Hohenzollern sequence the band had been playing Offenbach's can-can, a popular piece from a satirical comedy, of course, but one which nevertheless initiates a series of gestures towards relinquished loves, Orpheus bereft of Euridyce anticipating Clive's romantic losses. Later, the foolish Clive finds himself in the part of Odysseus. Returning to London without Edith Hunter

(his Diana - she too was a 'hunter?'), he takes her sister to Her Majesty's Theatre to see a new musical play by Stephen Phillips entitled *Ulysses* (a happily topical coincidence, for the play was being performed there at the time the narrative is set). There, he sees Hoppy now married to his old acquaintance Sibyl (another classically unobtainable woman?). Clive sits in the audience watching the performance and identifies with the play's heroic wanderer, "the most unhappy of mankind", in Athene's words, longing to "view the smoke of his own fire curling blue." This classical world is further alluded to, of course, in the *mise-en-scène* of the Bathers Club sequence.

If the hotchpotch of images in the credit sequence tapestry is an awkwardly heterogeneous mix of ancient and modern, this anticipates the film's deliberate resistance to the constraints of any one genre. An understanding of how *Blimp* operates can best be achieved by looking at its relationship to generic form. Another of the ways in which the film might be seen as a pastiche is the daring way in which it brings together a range of genres without, arguably, ever coming to rest. I would suggest that its closing frames represent an attempt to find repose squarely within the style of wartime documentary and propaganda realism, although harsher critics damned it at the time for failing to do so, and the subsequently quizzical stance towards its 'ambiguity' may be a response to this refusal on the film's part to align itself along any obvious or guiding generic co-ordinates (certainly the film's elisions frustrate any effort to read it as classical narrative). Of course, this is the very point of popular genres: in the terms of the marketplace they serve as a means of product differentiation, allowing for the maximum possible identification between producer and consumer. The codification of film into generic groups united in a shared set of motifs and conventions works as a grammatical shorthand, clueing the viewer into the cinematic experience by triggering the recognition of a known environment, one in which s/he feels 'at home'. Broadly speaking, genre is thus committed to the familiar and works to orientate the

viewer within an already understood landscape. In her encyclopaedic survey of British genres, Marcia Landy unequivocally catalogues *Blimp* as a “War Film”, although her study includes assessments of other forms, most notably the “Film of Empire”, the “Heritage” and the “Historical” film.⁴⁰ These all have their own signifying practices, and *Blimp* salutes each of them meaningfully (Alexander Korda, committed as he was to the production of ‘prestige’ films to win over foreign audiences, was heavily involved with these related ‘spectacular’ genres). While clearly Landy is right to connect *Blimp* with the war film, this remains a problematical conclusion. Admittedly, *Blimp* foregrounds its topicality, is addressed to the conditions of the People’s War, and includes many of the dramatic scenarios and images of the conventional war film (its focus on the conditions of the Home Front is typical: scenes of armed conflict are rare in films actually made during the war). It is better to consider *Blimp* as a hybrid: with its leap back in time from 1942 to 1902 it partially adopts the stance of the Korda’s ‘Imperial epics’, a familiar ‘prestige’ category within British cinema history. But the nod towards these Kiplingesque works is soon brought into question. *Blimp* exposes the fixity of mind associated with the earlier film genre by attempting to bridge the gap between it and the contemporary war film. Significantly it signals towards many of the features which are emblematic of the Empire genre - such as location shooting, the exotic, scenes of armed conflict and conspicuously muscular bouts of heroism - yet it denies the viewer any of the expected spectacle (such spectacle may be non-seen, but it is clearly articulated in an off-screen space, and the very act of displacement serves, as we shall see, to undermine the implicit bravado of the British military hero). Clive Candy becomes a disorientated wanderer, outcast unwittingly from a world of 19th century, ‘Fringe of Empire’ adventure to

⁴⁰ Landy. p. 150.

renegotiate a relationship with the present. He is part of a residuum of meanings, a cultural inheritance whose validity and worth are entirely implicated with Britain's military and imperialist past, and whose relevance to the 1940s, the film suggests, needs urgent revision. *Blimp* interrogates the earlier genre, stretching it to test its elasticity, examining some of its tropes to expose its assumptions.

By the 1930s, the Empire genre was arguably already outdated, harking back to the heyday of colonisation just as the sun was beginning to set on that period. Korda's Empire films could be said to endorse jingoistically his adopted homeland with its 'civilising' mission; to affirm the verities of the 'white man's burden'; to hark back to the ideologies of the 19th century (unless, reading their militarism in the context of the 1930s, we see them as critiquing in a vague way that decade's policy of appeasement). They, like *Candy*, draw on popular myths and popular history. Like Blimpishness, they belong to an older order which *Colonel Blimp* is seduced by but which it cannot help but discredit. In particular, *Blimp* works to reformulate the crude construction of 'otherness' associated with the Empire adventure yarn, and this is a distinctly modern gesture in wartime Britain.

Crunching gear-changes between genres are a feature of Powell and Pressburger. As I have argued it is a mark of their film's Romantic credentials that they resist tidy generic categorisation. Thus *A Matter of Life and Death* is a brave mix of highly topical Anglo-American propaganda and fantasy; *Black Narcissus* moves from being a 'woman's film' or 'melodrama' (granted the troubling looseness of those categories) to being a full-blooded gothic horror as the articulation of female desire becomes psychotically contorted. This readiness to transgress beyond expected generic horizons may be married to the recurring thematic in Powell and Pressburger's work already mentioned, namely their entry into alternative states of being, of subjective and

magic spaces which express the Romantic idealism informing their narratives and their self-reflexive fascination with the 'magic space' offered by cinematic illusion itself.

A host of political implications might be ventured from this violation of genre norms, particularly given the questioning of tradition which forms the key to *Blimp*. Writers such as Judith Hess Wright⁴¹ and Thomas Sobchack⁴² agree that the strict adherence to popular and well defined genres is reactionary, that the basic co-ordinates of a genre tend to be fixed, and that they serve to uphold the status quo. Thus, Sobchack argues that "bound by a strict set of conventions, tacitly agreed upon by film-maker and audience, the genre film provides the experience of an ordered world and is an essentially classical structure."⁴³ We might object, of course, that since genres are nothing more than artificially recognised groups classified according to a set of pre-determined characteristics, they necessarily remain as static forms until they either suffer radical redefinition, become historical curios worthy only of academic inquiry, or fade entirely into neglect. The tendency towards redundancy is nevertheless inherently a feature of genre form. Hence, the more obviously successful genres (the western, horror, gangster movies and science fiction) present their conflicts and find their solutions at an archetypal level. They avoid any complicated or sustained exploration of real historical relations, preferring mythic reworkings and repetitions of their fundamental structuring devices in accordance with their own internal schemes of often absurd logic. It would be wrong to suggest that the genre actually *is* an ahistorical concept. The conflicts and solutions which appear to have 'universal' application merely mask

⁴¹ Judith Hess Wright, 'Genre Films and the Status Quo', in Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *Film Genre Reader II* (University of Texas Press: Austin, 1995).

⁴² Thomas Sobchack, 'Genre Film: A Classical Experience', in Grant, (ed.).

⁴³ Sobchack, p. 102.

their own historicity; and the generic conventions by which they are defined were not at any time plucked from a cultural or social vacuum. At the core of a genre is a structure composed of historically formed motifs. Moreover, at the individual level, specific genre films are inevitably inflections of the values of the culture of which they form a part. As conceptual paradigms, genres are rigid formal structures, and the films made within generic traditions are determined by their fidelity to the rules of the genre. At all times, there remains a tension between the classical standards of the genre, and the empirical instance of the text.

Blimp, then, has been offered as a critique of the Empire genre. The Empire films produced by Alexander Korda's London Films form a block of works which draw largely on popular literature. *Sanders of the River* (Zoltan Korda, 1935), *King Solomon's Mines* (Robert Stevenson, 1937), *Elephant Boy* (Robert Flaherty and Zoltan Korda, 1937), *The Drum* (Zoltan Korda, 1938), *The Four Feathers* (Zoltan Korda, 1939) and perhaps Korda's 1942 American production of *Jungle Book* (Zoltan Korda) form a largely coherent group, with the exotic Arabian fantasy *The Thief of Bagdad* (directed in part by Michael Powell, (1940)) vying for inclusion. It would not be too great a caricature to suggest that these films are united in their treatment of the exotic, their apparently simplistic constructions of national, racial and gendered identity, and their imaginative investment in the virtues of adventure (wherein lay their international marketability). Such adventure are bound up with the affirmation of the British imperial ethos, with the sound physical health and good mental state of the British elite abroad, and with the equation of a certain type of masculinity with various heroisms done in the service of the Empress. It is a genre so well-defined as to have been met with close satirical treatment: in *Carry on up the Khyber* (Gerald Thomas, 1968); and earlier in Robert Hamer's *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949), whose General Rufus D'Ascoigne tediously re-stages his African campaigns at the dinner table enlisting as props

whatever food, crockery or cutlery is available, in close parody of General Burrough's identical (and, to be fair, similarly comic) recreation of Balaclava in *The Four Feathers*.

Many of Korda's films from Denham Studios can rightly be considered as epics. The epic "celebrates in the form of a continuous narrative the achievements of one or more heroic personages in history or tradition". With this, the O.E.D. goes on to state that "the typical epics...have often been regarded as embodying a nation's conception of its own past history". It concludes with the tellingly nuanced afterthought, "*or of the events in that history which it finds most worthy of remembrance.*" A link can thus be drawn between the determinants of a "national cinema", the hegemonic fostering of official history, and the purposes of the "epic" film (as such perhaps Olivier's *Henry V* (1944) stands as an exemplary wartime epic).

The epic protagonist is of course the ideal heroic type on whose actions the fate of the nation depends. Alexander Korda was drawn towards the biopic form, mythologising the lives of such iconic figures as Helen of Troy, Samson and Delila, Catherine the Great, Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, and Lord Nelson. But of course, with such works Korda aimed to exploit the commercial popularity of the genre, and with his first prestigious success in Britain, *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933) he hit upon the formula of the naively irreverent exposé, something which lacks the high moral ambience of the 'genuine' epic (the rumbustious tone of *Henry VIII* is, for example, very different from the altogether more respectful pageantry of Wilcox's 'Victoria' films). Nevertheless, he considered this film to have an appropriately English subject, and the plaudits he and Charles Laughton received justified the policy of 'internationalism' with which London Films were associated.

Korda's investment in tales of British Imperial adventure was part of this same marketing strategy, a projection of national myths which was bound up entirely with advancing the economic

base of the domestic industry by capturing the foreign market (particularly this meant appealing to American audiences, although he also targeted the colonies). Blatantly commercial factors thus determine the character of the films. Karol Kulik quotes Korda's assertion that "to be international a film must first of all be truly and intensely national," and she argues from this that "the international film was to be one that relied on stereotyped situations and characters peculiar to one country, but recognised immediately by audiences of other countries."⁴⁴ However much the Empire films appealed to Korda, a committed Anglophile, and however much they offered situations and myths immediately recognisable to the domestic audience, ultimately it was their suitability to the foreign market (due to their set action sequences, formulaic constructions, and sketched 'types' of English temperament) which drew Korda to them. Well though they celebrate British national successes and the heroic activity of historical or quasi-historical champions, the function they serve is fundamentally economic, although their marketability rests upon a pre-given familiarity with their typical terrain. As 'Heritage' movies (if you like), these films draw on a predominantly 19th Century popular culture and in the context of the 'thirties attempt to reassert the certainties of a Pre-First-World-War era.

The late Victorian and Edwardian works of popular fiction upon which the Korda films are drawn clearly bare their own national ideological purpose. They sell heroism. They are soldier's stories. They are bound up with Britain's sense of self, the soldier (he is almost always an officer, and the aristocratic is almost always celebrated) returning to Britain a mirrored image of its ideally constructed masculine type, one whose gendered identity is at the same time an exemplary model of *national* virtue. Real manhood is mapped onto the political terrain of the

⁴⁴ Karel Kulik, *Alexander Korda: The Man Who Could Work Miracles* (W.H.Allen: London, 1975), p. 97.

Empire, and the one endorses the other. Graham Dawson's survey of soldier heroes in the popular imagination takes as its premise that "their stories became myths of nationhood itself, providing a cultural focus around which the national community could cohere."⁴⁵ In cinematic form they also clearly formed part of the British cultural profile of the 1930s (it might well be argued that their focus on masculinity and nationhood acts as a compensatory reinvestment in manhood in the wake of the losses of the First World War). Such tales are potent: it is the potency of masculine energy marshalled in the vigorous assertion of the Imperial assumption. They form part of a culture industry which for the expanding popular readership of the late 19th century had offered a Boy's Own "national epic still defined fundamentally in terms of military achievement."⁴⁶ We may see these works as fantasies. Not fantasies in the crudely escapist, pejorative sense of the word, offering vicarious libidinal satisfaction (although any representation of heroic valour might well offer such a satisfying thrill), but fantasies in the sense that they are metaphors, displacements, part of the cultural machinery by which images of subjectivity are made available, gendered social identities are internalised and built upon, and the social order is reproduced.

What then do these stories parade, and what do they camouflage? Korda's *The Drum* was shot by Georges Perinal, among whose other work are *The Four Feathers* and *The Thief of Bagdad* in Technicolor and *Sanders of the River* in black and white. He was also the photographer on *Blimp*, and the bright colour code of Powell and Pressburger's film clearly reproduces Perinal's earlier style. Captain Carruthers, played by Roger Livesey (reinforcing the

⁴⁵ Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinity* (Routledge: London, 1994), p. 1.

⁴⁶ Dawson, p. 147.

connection with *Blimp*, of course), is an exemplary British ruler in India, the embodiment of law and order entrusted with administrative and judicial competence in the remote base of Tokot. Valerie Hobson (the only woman in the film) is his wife Marjorie, loyally supportive, clearly functioning as the essence of London style and manners, indefatigably bringing a touch of Chelsea glamour to the frontier. The representation of the Indians is, as we might expect, crude. Some are pragmatically loyal to the British, wise to the benefits of what is referred to as British “protection.” Sabu as the young Prince Azim is as usual affectionately exoticised and infantilised, yet at the age of fourteen in the film his infantilisation is curiously and troubling mixed with overtones of the erotic, opening up the dubious mixture of paternalism and exploitation which characterises the British domination of the native population. Raymond Massey plays a usurper, Prince Ghul, illegitimately seizing power in Tokot, planning the assassination of Carruthers and his troops. Played with customary relish by Massey, he is uncomplicatedly evil, clearly presented as a madman, betokened by his delight in committing atrocities such as beheading and torture. The plot involves Ghul’s murder of Prince Azim’s father and seizure of power, Azim’s friendship with a lowly young drummer in the British army, his involvement in the rescue of his friends Mr. & Mrs. Carruthers (Azim beats the drum to warn Carruthers of the attempted massacre), and the restoration of legitimate authority.

As such *The Drum* is simply structured (order, disorder, order), richly costumed, with location shooting (albeit with the hills outside Harlech substituting for India), military music, action sequences, and dancing (both Highland and Indian): it seems to offer an unproblematically polarised and *spectacular* justification of the British Imperial adventure. Typically the genre supposes a strict gendered division of space allotting the private world of domesticity to women and the public active outdoor life to men. While *The Drum* ships Valerie Hobson to the front line,

and permits her to save Sabu by shooting his pursuer, her subservience to her husband is stressed and her presence is marked as a token embodiment of bourgeois 'Home Life'. She is an adornment. In typically orientalist fashion, India is here less a geographical reality than a psychic arena, where men and nation may be tested, where the alien or the exotic is either disarmed by rendering it childlike, or demonised in order that it may be suffer a decisive exorcism. The purity and good health of Britishness is sustained by a paranoid projection of otherness (this is the preferred reading, of course: but the parallelism of Scottish and native dancing, for example, could be said to question the reductive polarity between East and West on which the film depends, unless we regard the spectacularisation of stereotypical Scottishness as a further complicating factor).

The Four Feathers operates on a more epic scale, being extensively shot on location in the Sudan and containing some very effective Technicolor photography. It employs a large cast of extras, offering grand spectacles of battles shot as dynamic action sequences with a highly mobile use of cameras, echoing the ambitious scope of D.W.Griffiths and anticipating Olivier's *Henry V*. It repeats many of the tropes of *The Drum* released the year previously, although here, the protagonist's wife is left at home. Harry Faversham's apparent cowardice in resigning his commission on the eve of the campaign to retake the Sudan and to avenge the "murder" of General Gordon is marked as an illness (denoted by the sympathetic attendance of a friendly doctor). Yet his bravery is ultimately proved, as he works disguised as a mute Arab to rescue his erstwhile companions. This donning of a disguise, a masquerade of identity, betrays the imperial adventure story's affiliation to the spy thriller genre (see Chapter 4.2), and does suggest some lack of confidence in simplistic and overt 'displays' of uniformed Britishness. However, with the re-taking of Khartoum, the myth of the British Imperial mission and of the efficacy of the military

aristocracy is restored. Despite Harry's disguise as an Arab outcast (clearly an incorporation of the 'Other'), the natives really are little more than an undifferentiated mass of "Dervishes" and "Fuzzy-Wuzzies".

3.1.4: Proving Manhood: The Rules of the Game

How far, then, does *Blimp* unpack and transform its generic inheritance? This question can be addressed by looking at how it represents masculinity and heroism, and at how it shifts in its negotiation of 'otherness'. Without stressing any personal commitment to the Empire genre, Powell does suggest that he viewed *Blimp* as something of a throwback: "I looked on it as an old-fashioned film, a relic of the pre-war days of which the key was the exquisite photography of George Perinal."⁴⁷ In this respect *Blimp* represents an unusual Archers colour film (it was their first in colour). Later, Powell would famously strive for the symbolic use of colour, and for a synthesis of all aspects of film language towards a single expressive whole. With *Blimp* the impetus is emulation and pastiche, rather than any heady synaesthetic experience in a high Romantic register. "*Blimp* was, after all," says Powell, "a conventional film, a black and white film coloured"⁴⁸ with Allan Gray's imitative music "applied on, as it were ... like the rich glazing on a ham."⁴⁹ The casting of Roger Livesey as Candy, even if it was an historical accident brought about through the War Office's intransigence regarding releasing Olivier from active service to play the part, strengthens, of course, the textual connection with *The Drum*.

⁴⁷ Michael Powell, *A Life in Movies* (Mandarin: London, 1992), p. 449.

⁴⁸ Powell, p. 536.

⁴⁹ Powell, p. 582.

Although the extended flashback sequence in *Blimp* can be seen as a subjective recollection, the viewer's identification with Candy remains partial. His biography is shown to be a chronicle of denials, repression and displacements, evasions which when made visible remarkably undercut the settled image of the soldier hero. Candy's retreats and silences are issues of critical importance, for not only does his relationship to women and 'Home' cast the Empire hero in a new light, but his faith in the stainlessness of British public history is left open to question. Powell and Pressburger's advertised attack on aspects of the British military mentality picks away at the coherence of the Empire genre which had been so much an expression of that national, marshal, masculine ideal. Their radicalism here is, as I have said, countered by their conservative investment in a sentimentalised representative of the type they have set out to denounce, yet this sentimentalism is a piece of patchwork repair. It cannot entirely mask the reactionary ideology which the film sets out to expose.

At his most youthful, Clive is indeed shown to be dynamic and vigorous. He is also a man of his times, not yet encrusted with the hardy carapace of Blimpishness which will eventually seem to envelop him. He is progressive enough to admire the "lovely lines" of a new motor car which speeds past him and Hoppy outside the Bathers Club (the motor vehicle as token of modernity is very much a feature of the opening 1942 sequence too: here in 1902 amongst the horse-drawn cabs it marks the period as one of transition, anticipating the red car trundling through the opening tracking shot of turn of the century America in Minnelli's *Meet Me In St Louis* (1944) although in spirit recalling Orson Welles' *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), another elegy to a fast receding world, released a year before *Blimp*). We quickly learn in the exchange between Clive, Hoppy and the so-called 'period Blimp' that Clive has just returned from South Africa where he has won the Victoria Cross. The strongest affirmation of his masculine credentials thus relates

to an incident prior to the start of the narrative. It aims to establish his pedigree as soldier-hero, although in a departure from the Empire genre, it denies us any exhibition of actual military valour. Genuinely heroic activity is displaced onto its signs and tokens: the medal and the uniform, and as the film progresses, Clive's masculinity will be increasingly compromised. Almost immediately, the reputation of the British in the Boer War (and with it, Clive's V.C) will be tarnished. Clive will be outraged at the spy Kaunitz's allegation that women and children were killed in South Africa, that they were starved in concentration camps. He will dash to Berlin to silence the scoundrel. But the suggestion of ill-treatment is never satisfactorily erased. It is worth noting, of course, that scandals such as the shootings of prisoners had become well-known world-wide during the Boer war (the court-marrying and subsequent execution of the Australian Bush Veldt Carbineers Lieutenants "Breaker" Morant and Handcock in 1902 had caused outrage), while Emily Hobhouse's campaign to publicise the conditions in the camps had successfully enlisted Lloyd George's support, with the high death rates having been denounced by him in Parliament.⁵⁰

As the 'period Blimp' swaggers peacock-like, resplendent in his scarlet livery, inspecting Clive's and Hoppy's similarly gorgeous outfits, the display and mutual admiration of these male attributes marks Clive's military life as one of homosocial exclusivity and narcissistic recognition, rather than one of activity. His fondness for the world of the Bathers Club further roots the him in an all-male environment, one marked by a sluggish passivity, free at least from visible contradiction. Of course, the cinematic fascination with masculinity as spectacle might be seen to compromise the purported construction of ideal manly virtues. Even as it is inflected in the

⁵⁰ Tom Pakenham, *The Boer War* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson: London, 1979).

more 'heroic' films of the empire genre (and elsewhere in other 'male' genres such as the western, the biblical epic and the battle film, all set to offer simple masculine ideals), the casting of the male as the object of the implicitly male gaze has troubling implications. Here, in *Blimp*, masculine activity is very often signalled without being shown. Military spectacle will later be shown but be explicitly ridiculed, as visitors to the nursing home after Clive and Theo's duel are astonished by the diplomatically awkward collision in the vestibule between British dragoons and members of the German Ulan Guards, each of them in full regimentals. Desperate that decorum be maintained, a hastily agreed protocol determines that the opposing armies may enter the doorway in parallel. The showdown with the ex-double-agent Kaunitz in the Café Hohenzollern had been shown as an amusing squabble which descended into a dishonourable brawl, a slapstick parody of disastrous international relations. The 'Vestibule Incident' is presented with full mock-heroic honours. These twin tactics - banishing honest soldiery to an off-screen space or treating it comically - obviously undercut *Blimp*'s handling of epic heroism (a third tactic, of course, is to suggest the full horror of war, and *Blimp* will broach this later).

Much that has been written regarding masculine spectacle, of course, is a response to Laura Mulvey's assertion that male heterosexuality is the normative condition structuring cinematic identification.⁵¹ Mulvey famously suggests that the act of looking is either a voyeuristic assumption of power which actively investigates and punishes the passive object of the gaze (this look is closely linked to the male protagonist's dynamic position as the agent of narrative resolution); or the look is a fetishistic disavowal, freezing the (female) object as something worthy of contemplation in its own right. The condition of "to-be-looked-at-ness" is the result of a

⁵¹ A representative selection of views on the male spectacle can be found in Steve Cohen, & Ina Rae Hark (eds.), *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* (Routledge: London, 1993).

feminisation, or at least a demasculinisation. Given the assumption here that an erotic component governs the act of looking and that such looking is an expression of power, the sado-masochistic or homo-erotic element of the look at the male is something which classical cinema is quick to disown. For example, writings on the western or the gladiator film (a sub-genre of the biblical epic) have focussed on the way the visible mutilation of the male body serves to offset or divert attention from it as an object of desire. With regard to the ritualisation of violence, Steve Neale suggests that “the anxious ‘aspects’ of the look at the male ... are here both embodied and allayed not just by playing out the sadism inherent in voyeurism through scenes of violence and combat, but also by drawing upon the structures and processes of fetishistic looking by stopping the narrative in order to recognise the pleasure of display, but displacing it from the male body as such and locating it more generally in the overall components of a highly ritualised scene.”⁵² This brings us to Clive’s duel with Theo in Berlin, 1902, where an unreal attention to the artifices of honourable action serves as a sublimation of the erotic, the visceral, the real.

The excessive observance of detail which prefigures the duel marks the period and the class as one fatally disassociated from reality and fixated on form. This very addiction to high ceremony in a situation promising butchery undermines the full-bloodedness which the duel is meant to prove. Despite the assurance of heterosexuality suggested in the ruse concocted by the Embassy that the duel is an affair of the heart (the men will seem to be fighting over Edith), this scene, like so many others of robust male conflict, is flushed with a blush of sado-masochistic homoeroticism which worries away at its presentation of heroic valour. Glimpses of naked flesh seen when the Swedish Attaché Colonel Borg asks Clive to undo his shirt, and the cutting away

⁵² Steve Neale. ‘Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men in Mainstream Cinema.’ in Cohen & Hark (eds.), p. 17.

of Clive's sleeve to free his movement, hint at the real damage about to be done to the body. With the arrival of Clive's hitherto unseen combatant, the curious and handsome Theodor Kretschmar-Schuldorf, a sense of recognised mutuality shown in a conventional shot/reverse shot of close-ups erases any difference between the men. Connected not only by gender but by class and military outlook, and soon to be 'blood-brothers', they mirror each other, and are spliced together on film. All that separates them is nationality. As this quasi-balletic bout of fastidiously staged male-bonding is about to commence, however, the camera audaciously retreats. It does not simply pan back, but cranes overhead, up and out of the massive gymnasium, dissolving through the roof, into the snowstorm, and then descending again to meet Edith's waiting carriage in the street outside. The thrill of the kill is denied to us.

A Freudian reading could delight in the sight of the two young men proudly displaying and clashing their swords and might suggest that the spectacle of sadism and promised penetration is here just too frank for the camera to look at straight. The crane-shot is thus an act of vertiginous disavowal. The clearest meaning of the duel sequence, however, is that this is an event governed entirely according to form and manners. It matters not that recoiling from the scene frustrates the narrative, for the outcome is, according to the values being satirised, immaterial: Candy's cohorts articulate a mind-set concerned more with the means, with the rules of the game, than with ends. As a piece of literal sabre-rattling it is another expression of the film's concern with circularity and teleology. While the extravagant preparations for this diplomatically necessary duel receive sharp satirical treatment, the exposure of ridiculous Prussian codes of conduct necessarily brings Clive's unwritten but equally rigid standards into question. Such a reading supports the text's quizzical attitude to military masculinity. Moreover, however, this is a critically anti-epic moment - another screening-off of male bravado. It is also, of course, the most significant ellipsis in a film

structured around the tension between the continuity of a biographical narrative (in which the personality marks a site of coherence), and a presentation of history marked by fragmentation and selectivity.

The combatants each receive minor injuries, and with honour satisfied, they come to befriend each other while convalescing. When he is fully recuperated, Clive returns to London, leaving Edith to marry Theo. Clive is unconscious at this stage of his own love for Edith. He jokingly dresses up in Edith's extravagant hat and celebrates Theo's and Edith's engagement with a cordial toast, but the hat clues us to the drastic un-manning which this failure to accomplish union with Edith represents. This much has not registered to Clive. Back in London briefly, he seems lost. He soon seeks compensation in the hunting life.

The shooting trophy montages which soon follow, as well as being further examples of temporal fast-forwarding which mark Clive's inability to keep pace, offer a synopsis of the customs governing the British military and imperial adventure. The hunting of game was obviously an integral ingredient in the Empire myth. The Boy Scout Movement, inaugurated by Baden Powell during the siege at Mafeking, contributed to this peddling of a popular image to aspiring British and colonial boyhood. It channelled together the necessary pioneer spirit and the need to dominate nature with rules of good conduct, patriotism and ideal manliness. While the Empire remained a testing ground for young men, the pragmatic need to understand and respect the wild was something which any domestic boy-child could similarly rehearse. However, the reality of game hunting was that it remained an exclusively elite activity. Born out of a public school mentality, it disguised as good sportsmanship a worryingly Darwinist supremacism, and offered a brutal apprenticeship into the skills and disciplines of soldiery. Such was the nature of this schooling. The mid nineteenth century saw the founding of many of Britain's public schools,

and as Eric Hobsbawm has pointed out, such institutions quickly “set about elaborating that actively anti-intellectual, anti-scientific, games-dominated tory imperialism which was to remain characteristic of them.”⁵³ Hunting was also an almost entirely male activity, one of the vigilantly guarded demarcation lines by which the gendered division of the Imperial culture was maintained. It follows, therefore, that hunting and chastity were necessarily concomitant. As John Mackenzie has written, “The connections between hunting and sex and between imperialism and sexual separation are indeed close. The Hunt has always been a masculine affair ... Moreover, collecting is invariably an emotional substitute and the collection of animal trophies came to be inseparably bound up with the separate male world of the Victorian and Edwardian periods.”⁵⁴

The reality of hunting as it relates to the popular imagining of masculinity is, therefore, other than (and, on its own terms, *less* than) it purported to be. Powell and Pressburger rely upon a knowledge of this culture, but their deeply cynical allusion to it goes further to diminish its credentials. The first montage of trophies is initiated by Clive’s realisation on his return from Berlin that he had loved Edith, now forfeited to Theo, and by his subsequent recognition that his effort to fill this loss by romancing Edith’s sister is futile. Returning to Cadogan Place, Clive looks wearily around his den, and as he walks onto and then off the screen to the Elgarian tune once marked as Edith’s motif but now connoting nostalgia and lack, his shadow is drawn out on the blank wall. The den literally becomes his ‘retreat’, the site of his evasion from a full and fulfilling life, and Clive’s cast shadow is appropriately and ominously ghost-like. To staccato

⁵³ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire: An Economic History of Britain since 1750* (Weidenfield and Nicolson: London, 1968), p. 141.

⁵⁴ John Mackenzie, ‘The Imperial Pioneer and Hunter and the British Masculine Stereotype in Late Victorian and Edwardian Times’, in J.A. Mangan & James Walvin (eds.), *Manliness and Morality: Middle Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1987), p. 179.

gunshot and to exotically crude pastiche music denoting parts of the Empire, animal heads begin to clutter the blank space. The unwitnessed episodes of manly valour suggest the traditional, familiar rhetoric of popular adventure, and seen as a succession of point-of-view shots, the trophies become tokens of a triumphant identification between Clive's ego and its imagined rugged ideal. Yet, of course, this is to ignore the deep irony of the sequence, for Clive's expeditions are clearly coded as a displacement. Hunting is a sign of the transmutation of sexual energy, and this reassignment of feelings suggests that adventure is nothing but a substitution. The evasion of reality is marked by Clive's two-dimensionalisation, as his substantial form is replaced on the screen by an ephemera, a walking shadow, an apposite nod to Macbeth, perhaps, for consequent upon the loss of his love, Clive's hunting life is a sound and a fury, a rampaging safari, signifying nothing. This view of hunting as a sexual displacement is reinforced, as if it were necessary, by a similar montage immediately after the death of Clive's wife Barbara, while its status as a denial of historical progress is made clear as this second speeded journey through the inter-war period culminates in 1938 with a map of Munich and strains of the German national anthem. That Clive later hangs Barbara's portrait in the den along with his other trophies seems to emphasise what is by now clear. It replaces, rather than proves, virility: it undoes Clive's nominal status as masculine epic hero (and of course, Clive's adoption of Barbara's family name "Wynn" - after his marriage it is fixed with a hyphen to his own surname - effects both a sentimentalisation and an effeminisation, marking the actual distance between Clive and the archetypal gods of Empire with whom he wrongly identifies).

What is ideologically significant about this connotation of hunting with sexual and emotional inadequacy is that it directly critiques the popular justification of Imperialism. Not only does it imply that the Imperial adventure is a flight from domesticity, but the focus upon the

collection of trophies rather than upon the supposedly skilful hunt lets that Imperialism be read as a grotesque acquisitiveness. The popularly imagined character-building attention to sportsmanship is, in keeping with the anti-heroic strategy of the film, invalidated by its relegation of hunting itself to another off-screen area, and all we are left with is the stuffed end-product of an already critically impaired masculine rite. Like Charles Foster Kane's Xanadu, Clive's Cadogan Place hideaway (with its 18 empty rooms) represents a desperate longing for plenitude, a need to fill a void. Paradoxically, the faster its walls are filled with trophies, the emptier the property seems to be, and the more hollow the gesture. That each of the montages culminates in an image of armed conflict (the earlier sequence, it will be remembered, goes so far as to pan to a German helmet, appropriately labelled "Hun, 1918, Flanders") links the ugly spectacle to the poetics of warfare and serves as a denunciation of any glorious rendition of battle. The First World War sequence which follows the first montage is infiltrated by similar images of dead animals: Murdoch finds Dead Cow Cross-roads, and orientates himself by getting a scent of the two horses lying unburied by the road (this is another piece of cosmetic self-censorship, as in the shooting script it is the smell of dead "jerries" which marks Murdoch's way⁵⁵).

There is a tragic irony to Candy's version of World War One. It is generally accepted, of course, that the nineteenth century rhetoric of heroic valour proved incompatible with the conditions of trench warfare by 1918. Clive begs to differ. At armistice, he speechifies vaingloriously, telling his batman Murdoch that what victory means is not just that they can go home, but, in emphatic close-up, that "Clean fighting, honest soldiery have won," that "Right is Might". He is by now in the grip of Blimpishness.

⁵⁵ See Christie (ed.) p. 183. As far as I can see, John Laurie, playing Murdoch, clearly says "horses", although Ian Christie's excellently edited script makes no note of the change.

The mise-en-scène of this sequence is plainly artificial, with the war played out on Alfred Junge's studio sets. These supposedly external scenes very strongly recollect the war paintings of Paul Nash, the Official War Artist, particularly those works of his which date from after his return to near the Front Line of Flanders in late 1917 (Nash wrote that at that time, "Sunset and sunrise are blasphemous, they are mockeries to man."⁵⁶) Nash's work had always contained a strong symbolic element, his early paintings being an imaginative response to the English rural scenery. With pictures such as "The Front Line, St Eloi" (1917), "Void" (1918) and "The Menin Road" (1918), the large panel commissioned by the Ministry of Information, he gives a stylised rendition of nature raped and ruined, what Roger Cardinal calls "landscapes of catastrophe."⁵⁷ The skeletonised tree trunks knifing splinter-like from mud-brown earth to black-blue sky in the hideously caricatured landscape of "The Menin Road" are effectively three-dimensionalised into Junge's set, and on this apocalyptic stage Clive waxes lyrical, while as the guns go mute a skylark mocks the devastation with full-throated ease. This is bitter pastiche, a telling collision of two irreconcilable visual discourses, for in his Blimpish guise, Clive is also a fleshed out icon, a comic grotesque, rudely insulting the trauma depicted in both in Nash's work and in Junge's emulative designs.

The irony here, of course, is so bitter because of what Clive knows about dubious allied activity during the war. While this activity is allotted to the South African Van Zijl, the geographical displacement cannot absolve the British. Van Zijl's looting is, we are told, something "learnt from the English in the Boer War" (the ghost of that unhappy episode still not

⁵⁶ Quoted in Margot Eates, 'Paul Nash : A Personal View of the Man and the Artist', in *Paul Nash: Paintings and Watercolours* (Tate Gallery, London, 1975), p. 42.

⁵⁷ Roger Cardinal, *The Landscape Vision of Paul Nash* (Reaktion Books: London, 1989), p. 25.

settled); and having tried to impress on Clive that the Germans know how to make their prisoners talk, after Clive's failure to extract information from the captured Germans he is left to interrogate them in his own brutal way. Clive's apparently unconscious denial of reality, marked by the highly artificial pose of nobility he adopts as the camera pans back from his Armistice oration (a panning back, of course, which merely accentuates the bleak environment around him) critically discredits his reliability, and adds weight to Kaunitz's undisproved allegations regarding the South African adventure.

3.1.5: Incorporating Otherness

The images of masculinity offered in *Blimp* are, when seen in the light of the Empire genre, crucially impaired. Perhaps only the young Spud, seizing the initiative by taking Candy hostage, survives phallically intact. Although in a comedy sequence he is beaten and almost outwitted by Johnny/Angela, and is compromised by his adoption of brutal "Nazi" methods, he and his army represent a united front and Britain's only hope. Leaving old-style military manhood more or less undone, *Blimp* tempers the (paranoid) projection of 'otherness' which characterised the genre on which it is founded. It secures itself squarely within the outlook of contemporary 'Home Front cinema', the axiomatic premise of which is the denial of all partisan interests other than those drawn along lines of battle. Something like Raymond Williams' diagnosis of a cultural practice whereby the dominant achieves hegemony by appropriating emergent and actively residual elements can be observed in *Blimp*'s strategy. Operating as a fantasy of incorporation, it strives towards two complementary goals: the construction of a united allied front; and the exclusion of Nazism, the demonised ideology isolated as the only significant other. Elements of that Imperial culture which *Blimp* alludes to are clearly already redundant; 'Blimp' himself is absorbed into the

new world, but only after undergoing a spiritual death.

Elsewhere, some of the film's inclusive strategy is cursorily achieved. The United Kingdom itself is geographically bound together as early as the opening sequence. As mentioned earlier, *Henry V*, where Fluellen, MacMorris and Jamy exemplify the nation joined together in war, is echoed in Spud's selection of his team for the assault on the Bathers Club, calling on Taffy, Geordie and Di Evans ("Oh we must have him *look you*"). Similarly, a black American soldier in World War One goes unmentioned as a naturalistic detail, and that his presence is not underscored suggests an acceptance of the United States as allies and a textual indifference to matters of race. With the promised meal between young Spud and old Candy at the end of the film, a reconciliation is made between youth and old age, an harmonious conclusion which grants forgiveness to Spud for the bitter pill he has forced Clive to swallow. Conversely, the double agent Kaunitz, reported to have spied for both the British and the Boers during the South African War, violates any sense of stable political identity and is left unredeemed.

Where *Blimp* struggles more is in its representation of class, in part because Clive is himself so class-bound, and because the film focuses almost exclusively upon the Harrovian officer class (and its Prussian Junker equivalent), marginalising its attention to society as a whole. It is in this crucial aspect that any attempt to place *Blimp* squarely within a tightly defined notion of 'British Wartime Cinema' must struggle, for so much of that cinema drew strength from its representation of the 'popular' - focussing as much on the image of the group (the 'masses', broadly conceived as the proletariat) as on the middle classes (and stressing an harmonious relationship between them). Yet when Clive makes damning reference to the "army of loafers at Hyde Park", or when he rails bombastically against Murdoch, his batman during World War One and subsequently his butler, it is his own prejudice, his own distance from the popular and divorce

from reality, which is being exposed. Clive's dismissal of social groups such as these exposes his intolerance: it is this attitude of superiority which marks his outdatedness by the 1940s, when a broad democratic alliance expressing a national will achieves its hegemonic position (the film is part of that mission). While Murdoch's inability to pronounce the name Theodor Kretschmar-Schuldorff becomes a tedious joke at the expense of the quaintly small-minded commoner (like all those Shakespearean comic characters whose grasp of language is mocked), the representation of this token working man is otherwise largely positive.⁵⁸ His active role as an air raid warden and subsequently in the Home Guard integrate him and by extension his class into the war effort. And Spud himself, of course, seems classless: an Everyman with an everyday nickname, his code-name "Beer Mug" contrasting with "Veuve Cliquot 1911", the antiquated, elitist password selected by Clive for the Home Guard exercise.⁵⁹

The triple casting of Deborah Kerr suggests a more engaged attitude to the shifting role of women. As Edith, the articulate and politicised governess in Berlin, resenting the limits of her education but pragmatically capitalising upon what she has been taught (good manners and the English language), she is someone who at first alienates the young Clive with her intelligence, although he later grows more curious ("You know, it's a bit staggering to see a girl take such an interest in politics"). Then, as the mill owner's daughter Barbara, she is cast as a conventional support to her husband. She and Clive obtain exactly the spouses they had imagined they would

⁵⁸ George Orwell makes note of the English working class's apparent xenophobia: "Nearly every Englishman of working-class origin considers it effeminate to pronounce a foreign word correctly" is his judgement in *The Lion and the Unicorn* (see Orwell, p. 153). Pressburger suggests the trait is equally applicable to the Scots.

⁵⁹ The end of the film sanctions Spud's vigour: so much is implicit in Clive's invitation to him to dinner (a neat symbol of mutual, generational respect, it endorses gradual evolution over violent revolution). An interesting comparison might be made with Hooper, Evelyn Waugh's hapless harbinger of a classless future in *Brideshead Revisited* - the brave new world of 'Hooper' is nothing but a dispiriting prospect to Waugh's narrator. Charles Ryder.

find: she is an adjunct to his military life. With the role of Angela, Kerr plays the fully mobilised woman, so fully mobilised, of course, as to articulate her own nominal defeminisation: she rejects the range of meanings conferred upon her by her given name (the idealised Victorian 'angel'), and instead identifies herself as Johnny. This name change echoes her altered career: before the war a photographic model she is now an army driver. Discarding the passivity of her earlier willing objectification, she is now literally at the wheel. Following hard upon Clive's revelation to Theo of the portrait of his dead wife (something which comments upon Clive's idealisation of the passive female form), there is a dramatic contrast in the sequence where Angela is shown driving Theo back home through the London blackout: Theo recognises Angela as she is briefly illuminated by a significantly *illicit* headlight. This despectacularisation of womanhood is a rendition, through the lighting code of the film, of a definite shift in divided gender roles. As Pam Cook points out, this "masculinization effect" marked a profound cultural change: "Utility clothing (such as Johnny's uniform) was not just utilitarian, it was a form of cross-dressing which allowed women to try on masculine drag - sanctioned, moreover, by official sumptuary regulations."⁶⁰ Angela's nominal and potentially destabilising masquerade of masculinity, or abandonment of femininity, is something which the film presents plainly: any implicit problems with Johnny's mobile gender are left unresolved (although these problems will return drastically in Powell and Pressburger's post-war Technicolor melodramas). The message to be gleaned is that in the implicitly temporary conditions of Total War, gender difference is an irrelevance and women are brought into what was hitherto a male public arena.

That men do not healthily come to inhabit the domestic space suggests a certain lack of

⁶⁰ Pam Cook, 'Neither Here nor There: National Identity in Gainsborough Costume Drama', in Andrew Higson (ed.), *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema* (Cassell: London, 1996), p. 54.

reciprocity. Of course, *Blimp* sets out to examine that military type of male whose sphere is distinctly undomestic, and when shown at home, Clive is lost (and of course, he fails to recognise the profound social shift which Johnny signifies). Ultimately, what *Blimp* presents, however, is the metaphorical and literal eradication of 'Home' as a concept altogether. Even Clive's 'den', a spatial rendition or solidified externalisation of his Boy's Own, juvenile, nonsexual life, a shrine/museum to his arrested development, is levelled by a German bomb. The explosive removal of his Cadogan Place hideaway forces us to redefine our sense of what 'Home' might signify: the connotation of the physical property itself with permanence is shown to be a delusion. Until war is over, the home - figured psychologically as private space - will not exist: in a bold act of incorporative arrogance, hegemonic cultural energies attempt the universal conscription of the personal, the sentimental and the individualistic.

Most affected by the loss of Home, and most obviously the recipient of radical incorporation, is the exiled German Theo. While the vitriolic attack on *Blimp* given by E. W. and M.M. Robson is lampoonable in parts (they find the film, roguish though it may be, to be "one of the most wicked productions that has ever disgraced the British film industry"⁶¹) their analysis of Theo's role is not entirely risible. Focussing upon the immediate post World War One sequence, which sees the German officer as a prisoner of war in Derbyshire, traumatised by defeat, unable at first to speak to Clive, then nonplussed at his genial reception by the British Establishment at Clive's house, and bitterly resenting the devastation wrought upon his homeland, the Robsons point to Theo's "childish, petulant resentment and desire for revenge"⁶² and note in his attitude

⁶¹ E. W. & M.M. Robson, p. 4.

⁶² E.W. & M.M. Robson, p. 14.

of contempt for Clive's class "the very roots, the very ingredients of Nazidom."⁶³ The evidence is in the film: Theo admits to Clive twenty years later that as he had left England for Germany he had harboured a disdain for British military foolishness. Yet venting an undisguised Germanophobia, the Robsons go on to doubt how this proto-fascist has become a contrite anti-Nazi by 1939.

The history of inter-war Germany is elided, but its effects upon the individual are forcibly present in the testimony given by Theo to his tribunal meeting in England in 1939, as he pleads for refugee status. The circumstances of the speech so close, of course, to Pressburger's own history of exile and alienation, Theo's testimony forms the emotional crux of the film. In these later sequences Theo is well-nigh the spokesman of the film's 'message' (and at the time this platform offered to a German character was, of course, a daring endeavour, however much Theo's experiences have brought him to disown any affinity with the Nazi party). Admitting that he fled to England in 1935 after the death of his English wife and the loss of his two sons to the Nazi party, his explanation is that he was "homesick", pining for a country he knew only as a prisoner of war, but one which feels familiar, through association with his wife, and the memory of a friendship struck with Clive almost forty years previously. The concept of Home is thus redefined as an emotional state; the ideology of nationhood, paradoxically something one might expect to be dominant at this of all times, is subordinated to a form of identity borne out of personal affiliations and a shared bloc of values grouped directly through their antipathy to fascism. Hence the strength of the international friendship between Clive and Theo. *Blimp's* integration of a 'good' German into its conscripted community daringly complicates the militant

⁶³ E. W. & M.M. Robson, p. 15.

polarisation of nationhood associated with crude propaganda, and that the intellectual weight of the film in its closing reels is allotted to this alien voice marks the degree to which Powell and Pressburger advocate the incorporative strategy. “It’s a different knowledge they need now,” Theo tells Clive. “The enemy is different ... If you preach the Rules of the Game while they use every foul and filthy trick against you, they will laugh at you! They think you’re weak, decadent! I thought so myself in 1919 ... You have been educated to be a gentleman ... but Clive, dear old Clive, this is not a gentleman’s war.”

At the end, Clive learns his lesson. The plunge into the pool at the Royal Bathers Club which initiates his autobiographical narrative is part of a baptismal experience, and after his bruising defeat at the hands of Spud’s army, what he learns is that his sense of fair play is inextricably bound up with disassociated and inarticulable romantic longings which are the mark of a fatal evasion. He turns to face reality. Gazing into the space which was once his house (a monument to escapism), but which has now been cleared to provide an Emergency water supply, this is the ‘death of Colonel Blimp’ promised in the film’s title. Clive fulfils Powell’s mission mentioned at the head of this chapter, that although “Englishmen are believers in good sportsmanship and anxious to believe the best of other people these attractive virtues...can become absolute vices unless allied to a realistic acceptance of things as they are, in modern Europe, and in Total war.”⁶⁴ The reality accepted is, in Theo’s words, that Nazism is “the most devilish idea ever created by the human brain.” Yet *Blimp* has one more incorporative act to achieve. Spud’s modern army approaches unseen, and military band music grows louder. A parallel tracking shot, the last shot in the film, passes Theo, Johnny and Clive in close-up, standing

⁶⁴ Christie (ed.), p. 28.

exposed in the significantly public space of the London street. Reaching the reinvigorated Clive, he salutes the camera, gesturing respectfully to a space behind the lens, before the cinema screen. It is an open recognition of the theatre audience, binding us as viewers into the film's integrated totality, boosting even further the forces it has assembled. Through this strenuous and consistent strategy of introjection, the text of the film covetously brings back to itself in a tolerant embrace much of that suspected "otherness" which the Empire genre fought to cast out. This is its ideological reasoning, our voluntary enrolment into a coherently marshalled community purchased through our understanding of, emotional identification with, and in some sense forgiveness of, the film's protagonists.

The end plate of the film returns us to the tapestry, a neatly woven history, threads knitted together into a coherent and intelligible pattern, and the camera moves in to examine the family motto, "Sic Transit Gloria Candy." Arguably satire is a patrician form, disdaining what it finds to be bad and thus working in the defence of an elite. But the dominant group to which *Blimp* grants its support is emphatically not the aristocratic officer class. This is contrary to Sue Harper's argument: discussing a range of Powell/Pressburger works, Harper repeatedly asserts that they defend such elite groups,⁶⁵ with *Blimp* existing also as a defence of the past *per se* and the Blimp class being seen as "the cement of society's disparate values."⁶⁶ Harper's reading suggests that what the film portrays is a world where *society* is marching out of step. But surely its 'elite group' (by which Harper is speaking of the 'old order') is shown to be fatally detached from the mass of society. Rather, it is the ideally imagined community of pragmatists allied in opposition to the enemy, the hegemonic and utopian social matrix of the classic wartime British

⁶⁵ Harper, p. 105, p. 106, p. 185.

⁶⁶ Harper, p. 106.

cinema, which the film endorses. Yet the text leaves implicit ruptures in the official history presented in the tapestry's pageant of chivalry: the Boer War episode merely alluded to; the devastation of World War One: these are telling dropped stitches. While Spud's pro-active clear-sightedness is ultimately endorsed, there is a paradox that his behaviour to Clive is undeniably brutal (he is young and armed; Clive is old and naked). The text thus works to ensure that 'uncivilised' wartime activity is something which is only temporarily and regrettably necessary. It also allows for an ideal solution in the promised dinner to be offered by Clive and to be accepted cordially by Spud: a ritual communion based on good manners but nevertheless expressing a real and living meaning. Nevertheless, while the satirical dimensions of the film successfully exposes hypocrisy and ridicules the indulgently sentimental attitudes harboured by Clive, at the same time it cultivates its own sense of sentimentality by aiming to foster in its audience so strong an emotional attachment to the very object of its gentle derision.



3.2: Equivocal Arcadia: *A Canterbury Tale* and the Cultivation of England

"England is a wonderful land. It is the most marvellous of all foreign countries that I have ever been in. It is made up of trees and green fields and mud and the gentry, and at last I'm one of the gentry." Rudyard Kipling

3.2.1: Images of England

To begin to 'place' *A Canterbury Tale*, some words about 'classic' wartime cinema. Basil Dearden's *The Captive Heart* (1946) characterises much 'British National Cinema' of its time, advocating the stoicism and the group mentality we associate with Ealing (and, of course, with the documentary movement), while also incorporating a romance plot to promote audience identification and to create suspense. This unlikely narrative marriage between public, consensual virtues (which run back through British cinema to John Grierson), and distinctly private desires (frequently renounced; sometimes indulged, but generally the stuff of melodrama) is a characteristic of the 'quality' British film. In Dearden's, we follow the experiences of a group of British prisoners of war during their time in a German camp. As such the film is perhaps unusual - harking back to the period of the war, although Asquith's *Way to the Stars* (1945) and Powell and Pressburger's *A Matter of Life and Death* and *The Small Back Room* are also set in the war years. One of *The Captive Heart*'s inmates, Captain Geoffrey Mitchell (Michael Redgrave) writes to his wife Celia, with an echo of Rupert Brooke, that their prison has been gradually

transformed into “a little piece of England.”¹ By creating their own tiny garden plots, the prisoners re-stage in miniature the ‘pastoral version’ of England which features so strongly in Captain and Mrs. Mitchell’s correspondence. In her replies, Celia (Rachel Kempson) describes a homelife in England which centres on the village green and on the Sunday game of cricket, so that her husband “*may picture it in (his) imagination,*” and while she writes, her voice is heard on the soundtrack accompanying a montage of images of daily life in her village. It is a sequence which recollects Dr. Frank Reeves casual remarks about his own village as it is reflected through his camera obscura in Powell and Pressburger’s *A Matter of Life and Death*. The P.O.W.s’ sense of Englishness remains central, although in a familiar gesture of tokenism, the film embraces a Scot, Lieutenant David Lennox (Gordon Jackson) and a stock Welshman, Private Dai Evans, (Mervyn Johns), each of these parts played by actors well used to representing their nation.

Captain Mitchell is not the only inmate imagining home. Neither is he the only one echoing with Rupert Brooke. Major Ossy Dalrymple (Basil Radford) watches a squadron of flying fortresses drone overhead and remarks that “They’ll be home in time for tea.”² Quaint images shared with poetry of the time, from Brooke’s to the Georgian poets of the post First World War period, are a common feature in 1940s wartime British cinema and as we shall see are a central feature of Powell and Pressburger’s *A Canterbury Tale*. Meanwhile, another prisoner, tiring of camp food, dreams of eggs, bacon and tomatoes with ketchup, his class betrayed by his diet. Yet another wonders what is happening in *Jane*, the *Daily Mirror* cartoon strip. This focus on a group mentality borne out of a stoical sense of duty typifies the philosophy of Ealing Studios (who were responsible for

¹ See Brooke’s “corner of a foreign field” in his sonnet series, 1914, V: *The Soldier*.

² Brooke’s *The Old Vicarage, Grantchester* ends with the couplet “Stands the church clock at ten to three? / And is there honey still for tea?”

the film), while the specific manifestations of nostalgia among the group depicts the class inflections of its individual members. The irony of the film's title becomes clear: incarcerated the prisoners may be, but their hearts are far from 'captive'. By imagining England, their sense of identity is affirmed; their right to liberty asserted. As Jeffrey Richards has noted, "The prisoners are sustained by a vision of England ... a rural England: the village."³ This vision is shared by all, regardless of class. What Richards does not go on to explore is the way in which this identification is based upon a process of fantastic investment on behalf of the P.O.W.s. It directly expresses the critically psychological dimension to national identity. Benedict Anderson's notion of national identity as an "imagined community" is effectively dramatised here.⁴ The notion of 'community' seems clear enough, but the way in which that sense might be 'imagined' is more debatable. *The Captive Heart* fictionalises just how national identity is rooted in internalised representations of iconic and stereotypical images.

'Captain Mitchell's' emotional identification with the England depicted in Celia's letters, and his romantic feelings for their authoress, is doubly and paradoxically significant because (as is quickly revealed in the first reel) the 'Mitchell' we see is an impostor. Celia's husband Geoffrey is dead: the character played by Redgrave is a Czech officer, Captain Karel Hasek, who has avoided detection after his escape from Dachau concentration camp by stealing the dead Mitchell's uniform. Masquerading as Mitchell by corresponding with the unknowing Celia, he is better able to sustain his disguise in the camp. From Celia we learn that the Mitchells' marriage had in fact broken down before

³ Jeffrey Richards, 'Basil Dearden at Ealing', in Alan Burton *et al* (eds.), *Liberal Directions: Basil Dearden and Postwar British Film Culture* (Flick Books: Trowbridge, 1997), p. 19.

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso: London, 1983).

the outbreak of war. The letters unwittingly exchanged between her and Hasek thus forge a new bond between the two: Celia imagines a reawakened affection for an apparently transformed husband; Hasek imagines a fantasy life to replace his own family killed by the Nazis. Their relationship develops within a textual rendition of English homelife, the idyllic nature of which encourages their shared emotional investment (a similar attachment to an imagined England is to be found in *Colonel Blimp* where Theo, made homeless by the Nazis, speaks of the love he has acquired for an English countryside he barely knows and which is for him inseparable from the memory of his deceased English wife). Hasek's very act of fraud, of course, foregrounds the constructed nature of national identity. As *The Captive Heart* concludes on V.E. Day, we finally see a happy resolution. Celia, recovering from the shock of learning that Geoffrey has been dead for four years, blissfully shares the moment with Hasek, who has telephoned her from London. Their conversation is drowned out by the triumphant soundtrack music and the explosion of fireworks in the garden of Celia's country house, signifying the end of war. Not yet physically united, their future happiness is nevertheless promised in smiling close-up shots and in the celebration of victorious nationhood which links them. Throughout the film, 'hope' and 'home' are inseparable.⁵

Repeatedly in British national cinema of the time we find renditions of the Home Front (either as it is experienced or as it is imagined) working along the lines established in this sketch of Dearden's film. Typically, the nation is visualised as an edenic countryside (the villages on display beg to be described as 'quintessentially' English). The

⁵ See Alan Burton, 'Love in a Cold Climate: Critics, Filmmakers and the British Cinema of Quality - the case of *The Captive Heart*', in Alan Burton *et al* (eds). Burton's dissection of the critical response to the film makes clear that while quality critics endorsed its realistic portrayal of group strength, they derided the 'Hollywood' inauthenticity of the romance plot (although this angle was promoted by trade literature to exhibitors, suggesting that the love story was admitted to be more popular than the documentary elements of the film).

point must be made that in general Englishness comes to represent the United Kingdom. In wartime cinema, with certain underscored exceptions, the nation is imagined as resolutely English. Furthermore, of course, it is a very specific image of England which achieves iconic status. Essentially rural and southern, this very particular (and given the strongly urbanised population of 20th century Britain, highly imaginary) version serves as a trope which is used to signify the central qualities of the nation at large. Other Britains (working class, municipal, suburban, northern, midlands, Scottish or Welsh) may be in evidence, but the Home Counties arable rhetoric predominates, a partial rendition of the nation, ignoring its largely industrial profile and assuming a spurious completeness. No less than three British feature films made within as many years in the early 1940s and exploring the nation's character derive their titles from John of Gaunt's glowingly nationalistic speech from *Richard II*⁶: *This England* (dir. David Macdonald, 1941) re-enacts historic moments in a country village for the benefit of a visiting journalist. *The Demi-Paradise* (dir. Anthony Asquith, 1943) has Russian engineer Ivan Kouznetsoff (Laurence Olivier) shedding his misconceptions about the British through his encounters with a host of eccentrics (not least Margaret Rutherford and Joyce Grenfell). Again, village life, coupled to a sense of historical awareness, is made emblematic of the nation, with a local fete presenting a set of victorious tableaux from England's past. David Lean's *This Happy Breed* (1944) admittedly differs in that it is London-based (it is also significant in that it is a chronicle of a specifically lower middle class family). Nevertheless it celebrates the British Commoner as it charts the way its protagonists' interact with moments in British history, and as such it articulates a clearly patriotic message. Elsewhere, from Ealing *Went the Day Well?* (dir. Alberto Cavalcanti, 1942), scripted by

⁶ See *Richard II*, Act II, Scene i, lines 40-50.

Angus Macphail (who also worked on the script for *The Captive Heart*), John Dighton and Diana Morgan from a story by Graham Greene, warns against complacency by showing the dramatic and brutal retaliation of another small village invaded by Germans: again the cosy and predominantly middle class village becomes emblematic of the nation at war. And yet again, *Tawny Pipit* (dir. Bernard Miles and Charles Saunders, 1944) allegorically tells of a rare bird's nest jeopardised by the army and defended by a local villagers, with a group of urban 'invaders' finding spiritual amelioration through contact with the values of the English countryside. Such films rely upon a safe set of representational codes. Advancing the centrality of both the rural community and the middle classes they are resolutely unchallenging to the values and aspirations of the dominant social group.

One factor to be borne in mind when considering these representations of the nation is that, although they are directed at the domestic market, in part at least they are geared to appeal to an international box office. In either event, they rely on the shorthand of stereotyping to maximise audience understanding and recognition. Conversely, the hugely popular American release, *Mrs Miniver* (dir. William Wyler, 1942) deploys a set of images of Englishness which are remarkably consistent with many indigenous products.⁷ Wyler offers another highly feudal, Home counties village view, with Lady Beldham (Dame May Whitty) at the pinnacle of its rigid class system. The Minivers (Walter Pidgeon and Greer Garson) enjoy a comfortable, in fact extravagant, lifestyle (perhaps more conspicuously consumerist than might be found in any English film of the time - if

⁷ A contemporary review in *Documentary News Letter* (August, 1942, p. 112) claims "You can sit at the Empire and hear practically the whole house weeping - a British audience with three years of war behind it crying at one of the phoniest war films ever made." Evidently the emotional impact of this hugely popular film was not undone by artificial construction of a mythic Englishness. The excerpt from the review is quoted in Jeffrey Richards, *Films and British National Identity: from Dickens to Dads Army* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1997), p. 176.

anything it is this as much as the casting which marks the film as an American product). Their family is a model for bourgeois aspiration. The importance of tradition is again heavily stressed, being focussed upon the rose competition at the Annual village flower show, which for years has been won by Lady Beldham because the other villagers deferentially refrain from entering any competing blooms. Lady Beldham acquiesces and gives the coveted prize to Mr. Ballard the Station Master for his rose, which significantly has been named after Mrs Miniver, and thus symbolises all of her maternal, patriotic, diplomatic and stoical virtues. Nevertheless, Lady Beldham's very act of acquiescence merely confirms her popularity in the village. As an act of *noblesse oblige* it perpetuates the feudal community.

But 'international appeal' alone cannot and does not explain the persistence of these village centred myths of Englishness. As Martin Weiner cites in his detailed study of the cultural links between Victorianism, pastoralism and Old Toryism, the sociological survey Mass Observation asked the question in 1941 to respondents throughout the country "What does Britain mean to you?" Weiner's speculated response seems reasonable: "One would expect expressions of affection for the threatened towns. Instead, the picture that 'Britain' called to mind was for the great majority one of generalised rural scenery, or of particular, familiar country places."⁸ The reaction might, however, have been predicted. As various historians have noted, the national myth of "Deep England", an imaginary heartland to offset the devastation of the war, was a powerful and highly resonant emblem in 1940s British culture.⁹ National discourses do

⁸ Martin J. Weiner, *English Culture and the Decline of the English Spirit, 1850-1980* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1981), p. 74.

⁹ See Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (Verso: London, 1985); Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (Jonathan Cape: London, 1991); and Robert Hewison, *Culture and Consensus: England, art and politics since 1940* (Methuen: London, 1995).

tend to resonate with metaphors of centrality and marginality, depth and surface (oppositions which are often implicitly connoted with essential truth and distrusted superficiality). Homi K. Bhaba's aptly titled *Nation and Narration* is quick to identify a cultural rhetoric of "homogeneity, cultural organicism, the deep nation, the long past (which rationalizes) the authoritarian, 'normalizing' tendencies within cultures in the name of national interest or the ethnic prerogative."¹⁰ *A Canterbury Tale* might initially be said to succumb to this centripetal dynamic - it certainly explores the English 'heart' - yet at the same time it remains critical: it is a quizzical intervention into Bhaba's dominant discourse. Before moving on to examine the film more closely it would be beneficial to establish why such a highly illusory and pastoral version of the nation should have gathered and retained its currency.

From 1801 to 1911 the proportion of the population living in urban areas rose from 20% to 80%, and the rise of industry was the dominant national characteristic.¹¹ A strong current within the national mentality clearly remained in denial about this irrefutable social shift. The notion of power vested in the country estate proved hard to dislodge. In part, we can ascribe this valorisation of the countryside to a residuum of Romanticism, which as an artistic movement was forged from a reaction against the soulless alienation associated with industry and urbanisation. By the end of the 19th century, land no longer formed England's economic base. But why, in a century marked by modernisation and technological progress, did a sense of national consciousness emotionally rooted in romantic myths achieve such a status, and how did seemingly retrograde cultural practices such as the excessive and indecorous gothic revival become so dominant, particularly

¹⁰ Homi K. Bhaba (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (Routledge: London, 1990), p. 4.

¹¹ Jan Marsh, *Back to the Land: The Pastoral Impulse in Victorian England from 1880 to 1914* (Quartet Books: London, 1982), p. 2.

within High Tory culture (although such medievalism was also to be found among dissenting voices such as Ruskin and Morris)? There was evidently something within that Tory mind-set which rejected the advances of Capital. Martin Weiner offers a powerful explanation. The opulent “excess” of the gothic revival was less an expression of the nation’s capitalist prowess, but rather an anti-utilitarian, non-materialistic insurgency against it. Like the emotional attachment to the land, it is evidence of an older frame of thought within hegemonic Toryism. In Weiner’s neatly encapsulated history:

The reconstruction of Conservatism in the Victorian and Edwardian periods was a two-way process. The Tory party shifted its base from the land to property in all its forms, making room for the new middle classes. ... (yet) many of the attitudes of Toryism lived on within the reconstituted party, alongside industrial and capitalistic values. The party continued to invoke the rustic spirit of the nation. Conservatism was enamoured of rural England, as much an England of the mind as of reality. Conservatives imbued with the Southern Metaphor of the nation tended to look askance at a number of central characteristics of industrial capitalism - its ugliness (or at least untidiness), its ‘materialism,’ and its instability.¹²

Never entirely modernised, the dominant patrician ideology accommodated itself to progress, but never concurred with the more aggressively entrepreneurial spirit of industrialisation. The attachment to the English countryside survived as a spectre of romanticism and as a fondly embraced relic of feudalism, as a redundant although still active ingredient within the ruling bourgeois classes. Wiener’s argument recapitulates that made by Eric Hobsbawm in 1968. Similarly noting the “assimilation of the British business classes to the social pattern of the gentry” from the mid-nineteenth century, Hobsbawm diagnoses that it was from this development that a particular “mythical

¹² Weiner, p. 98.

Britain” emerged. Thus, “the heavy incrustation of British public life with pseudo-medieval and other ritual, like the cult of royalty, date back to the late Victorian period, as does the pretence that the Englishman is a thatched-cottager or country squire at heart.”¹³

It was to this ideology that both Powell and Pressburger were drawn. Their 1946 film *I Know Where I'm Going!* presents some of the tensions borne out of the cultural development which Weiner diagnoses. Torquil MacNeil (Roger Livesey) is the Hebridean laird embodying a value system not borne out of capital (Pressburger's script makes the point that the islanders are not poor although they have no money!). Indeed, Torquil is often referred to as ‘Kiloran’, the man and his island home fused through his ancient title. Joan Webster's (Wendy Hiller's) fiancé Robert Bellinger is a millionaire industrialist living on Kiloran, having rented the estate from Torquil. Notably, Bellinger is whimsically and admiringly referred to by Joan as ‘Consolidated Chemical Industries, and he represents just that branch of the gentrified middle classes which Weiner argues was “admitted to full membership in the upper class.”¹⁴ Significantly, he remains off-screen as natural forces keep him out of reach (natural forces which are throughout associated with Torquil, of course). His capitalist values are rejected as Joan reorientates herself towards the romanticised laird. The village of Chillingbourne similarly resists the cash nexus: Bob is allowed to stay free at the village inn; Colpeper's kitchen provides all the treats his mother gives to the village children collecting salvage (while Bob simply gives them money). While Peter fixes with determination upon the wages he earns playing a cinema organ, it is clear his ambitions are ultimately musical not financial (and with a comically realistic

¹³ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire: An Economic History of Britain since 1750* (Weidenfield and Nicolson: London, 1968), p. 141.

¹⁴ Weiner, p. 13.

interjection, the Canterbury Cathedral organist wistfully remembers that his first job was in a circus, although as an evident example to Peter, he has implicitly never lost sight of his 'dream').

In practice, the historical process charted by both Weiner and Hobsbawm is a pessimistic one, marked by decline, where a major version of the nation's sense of identity is invested in an emotional reservoir fatally dislocated from reality. The 'idea of England' thus contains an element of almost desperate wish-fulfilment. The nation is paraphrased. A platonic 'essence' of England is concocted. "This hinterland between fact and possibility", in David Gervais's words, "has been the traditional territory of pastoral."¹⁵ In this territory, the countryside is used symbolically - as a fantasy world. A comparison might be made with the way in which Gainsborough Studios deployed history as an artificial stage in its popular series of costume melodramas, although I would make the distinction that the alternative world made out of 'the past' in these films represents a fundamentally *sexual* fantasy. What motivates this displacement into pasteboard history is the license it allows. In fantasies masquerading as history, the past is exoticised, eroticised and allegorised. The pastoral, where it appears in British cinema, may well retain this sexual element, in for example *I Know Where I'm Going!* and Powell and Pressburger's *Gone to Earth*, each of which locates itself, significantly perhaps, in a Celtic fringe, unchastened by English puritanism (and each of which was released after the war). But in authentically English versions, governed by the prevailing rhetoric of wartime, overtly sexual elements tend to be erased, energies being re-directed towards the war-effort (where public achievement is incompatible with private satisfaction). In *A Canterbury Tale*, where it is not entirely erased, sexual expression is perverted, and we

¹⁵ David Gervais, *Literary Englands: Versions of 'Englishness' in Modern Writing* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1993), p. 26.

are left with the psychotic behaviour of the gluelman and a few risqué recollections of casual encounters from soldiers and land army girls. The overarching message of the film, however, is idealistic: governed by the war ethic, chance sexual liaisons seized in the upheavals of war are denounced. So while Colpeper's gluelman campaign is a lunatic extreme, one which certainly undermines the legitimacy of his apparently feudal power base, at no point does the film censure the ideals he struggles to impart. The *carpe diem* indulgences of Gainsborough find no place in Chillingbourne.

British culture at times seems fixated on manifestations of rusticity, not least in traditions of landscape painting. The 'picturesque' has been a mainstay of British visual culture since the Romantic period, while in the Victorian era, the pre-Raphaelites' narrative paintings are a clear expression of that culture's favoured imagery. The point needs to be made that these and other expressions of the countryside constitute what is actually an urban myth, an alternative vision cherished by an increasingly metropolitan population (similarly, of course, *A Canterbury Tale* is constructed for an urban audience, and the presence of outsiders as protagonists in this and other pastoral films facilitates the city-dwelling spectator's identification with the what for him/her is an alien lifestyle). It is through such processes of identification that the subject is psychically knitted into an ideological matrix. In landscape painting, according to Ann Bermingham, "the countryside was also depicted more positively as an allegorical model of the organic society, in which all classes worked in harmony according to a plan that tended naturally toward the greatest good for the greatest number."¹⁶ The idealised rural scene thus forms a cultural ideal - in Bermingham's words, "one of our modern superstitions."¹⁷

¹⁶ Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1987), p. 191.

¹⁷ Bermingham, p. 193.

In the 20th century, Georgian poetry was likewise imbued with the pastoral spirit. An “essentially popular movement,”¹⁸ writers such as Rupert Brooke, Edmund Blunden, Ivor Gurney, W.H. Davies, Walter de la Mare and Edward Thomas celebrate a particular England. Taking Hardy and Housman as their mentors, they establish a ‘countryside literature’, well-defined enough to be thought of as a genre (Housman’s ‘In valleys green and still’ and de la Mare’s ‘Dry August Burned’ are unconsciously echoed in the early parts of Michael Powell’s autobiography, where he remembers the excitement of seeing the 1st Sussex Yeomanry billeted around his Kentish home as a child¹⁹). Novelistic expressions of Hardy-esque rusticity find a place at this time in the works of Mary Webb, of course, whose *Gone to Earth* would eventually appear in melodramatic Technicolor in Powell and Pressburger’s later output. The popular patriotism in such poetry cannot be disconnected from the events and sentiments of the First World War. Poems of “rose-scented lanes, apple and cherry orchards, village inns, and village cricket expressed the nostalgia of the soldier on active service and the threat to country life which educated readers feared from the growth of urbanism.”²⁰ The tradition survives intact, of course, emerging once more in works such as Dearden’s *The Captive Heart*.

Tapping into similar cultural currents, of course, English orchestral music of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was bound up with nationalism and was associated with a pastoral aesthetic (most notably of course with Vaughan Williams and Elgar). Alain Frogley has made the case that an oversimplification between Vaughan Williams and “Englishness” has been constructed (often with the aim of advancing the case of the

¹⁸ James Reeves (ed.), *Georgian Poetry* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1962), p. xiv.

¹⁹ Michael Powell, *A Life in Movies* (Mandarin: London, 1992), pp. 53-59.

²⁰ Reeves, p. xv.

Britten as a more Modernist, less insular British composer, although this argument ignores the influence of Ravel and Debussy on Vaughan Williams). Nevertheless it is the case that with his interest in the English folk song, and with works such as 'Lark Ascending' (1914) and his Pastoral Symphony (first performed 1922), echoes of Shelley's 'Ode' and Wordsworth's 'Solitary Reaper' have led to much of Vaughan Williams's work being received as deeply rural.²¹

Repeated and reformulated, a generally sentimentalised and universalised rendition of a fantasised nation became fixed in the cultural psyche. With the development of rail travel, and, by the 'thirties, the spread of bus services and private car ownership, popular tourism became possible for city dwellers. *A Canterbury Tale* makes specific reference to this developing leisure activity, as Colpeper predicts in his lecture in Chillingbourne village hall that after the war, the soldiers will want to take a holiday in his beloved Kent (a message which is also clearly directed at the film's predominantly urban audience). Such secular pilgrimages by domestic tourists in search of "Old England" (for with the onset of urban progress the countryside had become coterminous with the past) are descended from the romantic retreats of the Lake Poets, retreats which initiated the Victorian tourist boom to those parts of Cumberland and Westmoreland made famous in their writing. The rise in tourism was mediated and promoted through widely sold 'travelogue' literature: the late Victorian Poet Laureate, Alfred Austin made such a trip through England and published the popular *Haunts of Ancient Peace*. Later, publications such as the best selling 'Shell Guides' would further promote the burgeoning trade.

²¹ Frogley's point is that this "distortive" reading of Vaughan Williams led to a mythology about the composer's music. That it was derogatively referred to as belonging to a 'cowpat' school shows "the reaction in some circles against the rural cult and against insularity." See Alain Frogley, 'Constructing Englishness in Music: National Character and the Reception of Ralph Vaughan Williams', in Alain Frogley (ed.), *Vaughan Williams Studies* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1996), p. 15.

Clearly this culture had its dissenting voices. Auden for one recognised the trend towards village-worship, and sounded his cynicism about the commodification of the countryside. Attacking the popular idealisation of the rustic, his poem “It’s So Dull Here” commences “To settle in this village of the heart, / My darling, can you bear it?” and goes on to criticise the debasing effects of tourism and “townee smartness” on the once welcome village home.²² While Auden remains ambiguous (would his dissidence have ever embraced this village, even in its unsullied, pre-commodified state?), in the main he recoils. One man’s cosiness is another’s claustrophobia. As this chapter goes on to explore, *A Canterbury Tale* itself objectively criticises the culture of ‘village-Englishness’, while at the same time it is deeply in love with it.

The Shell guides (and posters) successfully created in the public mind a popular pastoral iconography. The pre-war head of publicity at Shell-Mex and B.P. was Jack Beddington (who was later in charge of film production at the Ministry of Information). Beddington commissioned paintings for these guides from artists such as John Piper, Paul Nash and Graham Sutherland (and texts from John Betjeman). Along with Henry Moore, Ceri Richards and David Jones these artists belonged to what became a school of neo-Romanticism in British art.²³ This group expressed a mystical, often surreal view of the British countryside, drawing from Blake, and further back to Arthurian legend (I would place Humphrey Jennings with these artists - his own brand of surrealist painting, and of course, his film work, owes much to Blake). As has been noted by Jane Alison and John Hoole, “Emblematic of the artists’ vision and the neo-Romantic sensibility is ‘the quest’, ... a search whose object is the shrine, an Eden or Arcadia; a quest made by artists

²² W. H. Auden, *Collected Shorter Poems, 1930-1944* (Faber and Faber: London, 1950), p. 154.

²³ See David Mellor (ed.), *A Paradise Lost: The Neo-Romantic Imagination in Britain, 1935-1955* (Lund Humphries: London, 1987).

sensitive to the spiritual loss of their day, a society which was to be broken by a tidal wave of war carnage and subsequent consumerism.”²⁴ *A Canterbury Tale* has an almost identical agenda (Pressburger would describe it as a “crusade against materialism”²⁵). It is in part an advertisement for the English countryside, an homage to Powell’s own childhood ‘haunts’ and a celebration of the aspects of Pressburger’s adopted homeland which seemed best to embody the alien’s sense of Englishness. Erwin Hillier’s cinematography presents the Kentish scenery itself as a spectacle, and particularly through the eager eyes of the American soldier, Bob Johnson (played by Sergeant John Sweet) and his buddy Mickey in Canterbury with his movie camera, the ‘sights’ and ‘things to see’ become fetishised acquisitions, captured on film. This is an inconsistent moment: although Colpeper praises English heritage and advocates curiosity about one’s environment, the relegation of one’s surroundings to an inventory of “sights” - must-sees - remains an inauthenticating act of reification, whereby heritage becomes ‘heritage’ (a shot in the film of Canterbury Cathedral, turned upside down as it is seen through the lens of a camera, visually repeats the function of my inverted commas). Given the film’s general distaste for consumerism and commodity, in foregrounding the naivety of its American tourists and their souvenir mentality, and in advertising the beauties of Kent, the film marks its own guilt in packaging and selling this landscape to its audience. The film can be seen to interrogate long-established traditions of representing the nation: part fond evocation itself; part critique of such softly romanticised versions. Its encounters with bizarre characters such as Colpeper and the village idiot - a perverse miscreant and a caricatured outcast - problematise its otherwise simple investment in the rural heritage.

²⁴ Jane Alison & John Hoole, ‘Foreward’ in Mellor (ed.), p. 7.

²⁵ quoted in Kevin Macdonald, *Emeric Pressburger: The Life and Death of a Screenwriter* (Faber & Faber: London, 1994), p. 233.

3.2.2: Nostalgia and the Pastoral

Delayed in Chillingbourne and then journeying to the ‘magical’ city of Canterbury, the healing process experienced by Alison, Bob and Peter is given mystical dimensions (apparently miraculous blessings are granted them). The film thus culminates in a surge of optimistic idealism. But at the opening, its protagonists are less than whole. A vital set of values are deemed to have been obscured by modern civilisation, but like the Pilgrims’ Road which runs near the village of Chillingbourne, they have survived nonetheless, and wait to be unearthed in order that the urgencies of the war may be faced. Faith in these values will redeem both the three travellers and the film’s wider constituency, the nation at large. As Alison remarks to the barman in the village pub, the “Bend” in the Road was “there all the same” even before its excavation, and now it can serve as a visual reminder of these values. The Road depicts the sense of mission (the answer to “why we fight”) which the film is aiming to instil: long-shots of the cathedral from the Bend in the Old Road are an indication of the goal - it is acutely significant, of course, that the Bend gave the ancient pilgrims their first sight of Canterbury. ‘Pilgrimage’ becomes a metaphor for the pursuit of the war effort itself, while the tightly-knit feudal organisation of Chaucer’s pilgrims is emblematic of the film’s ideal community - a model for the nation, bound by common purpose. This is the film’s propagandising agenda. If nationalism assumes importance to aspiring or subordinated groups (within the United Kingdom, this is the case in Scotland and Wales) it might be less vociferously articulated among secure or dominant nations. That an “English” national discourse should become so forthright at this time is clearly connected to the anxiety of war (as is discussed later, a similar imperial anxiety at the turn of the century motivated Kipling’s re-directed attention towards the condition of his ‘native soil’). The impetus is to sharpen and strengthen the country’s sense of identity.

Esmond Knight's voice-over during the 'Prologue' sequence of the film explicitly directs us to the dangers of the current anomie: "Alas! When on our pilgrimage we wend,/ We modern pilgrims see no journey's end", while Horton the blacksmith later bemoans to Bob Johnson, "it's the war - folks go mad," cursing short-sighted "capitalists" who "cut oak at midsummer!" (these capitalists play the same demonised, off-screen role as Joan Webster's fiancé in *I Know Where I'm Going!*). *A Canterbury Tale* gives us a representative group of people groping for orientation in the upheaval of wartime - which Colpeper refers to as an "earthquake" (and at the opening of the film the group is literally lost in the dark). Paradoxically, however, the rigours of war can also be seen ultimately to clarify the nation's values: as a passer-by ironically points out to Alison as she searches the bombed wreckage of Canterbury, the reward for the bombed-out streets is that "you get a very good view of the cathedral now." Here, the cathedral stands for antiquity, permanence and resilience, and embodies pre-capitalist principles: it is a decisively medieval variant of the symbolic value of St. Pauls to London during the Blitz, and is used to denote the ideological commitment of the film (which might be characterised as a hardy stoicism borne out of longevity).²⁶ Yet, crucially, the image of Canterbury Cathedral, made visible thanks to the bombing, is the object of a double investment, for it also suggests a romantic or sacred Utopianism, manifested through the 'blessings' which are apparently granted there. Powell and Pressburger thus endow the central symbol of their film with meanings which are at once immanent and transcendent, borrowing from a tradition of English pastoralism to find strength in the past through the invocation and reinforcement of a mythical old England.

²⁶ Discussing the links between Humphrey Jennings and Powell, Jeffrey Richards and Antony Aldgate note that Canterbury Cathedral is for Powell what St. Pauls is for Jennings, but point out that Powell's symbol is, of course, an older rural variant. See Jeffrey Richards & Anthony Aldgate, *Best of British: Cinema and Society, 1930-1970* (Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1983), p. 55.

In *The Country and the City* Raymond Williams traces the perseverance of a set of cultural ideas and feelings about the countryside, reformulated by each generation to account for changes in material conditions, but nonetheless maintaining a broadly consistent structure. Williams concludes that “the persistence indicates some permanent or effectively permanent need, to which the changing interpretations speak.”²⁷ The ideas we find in *A Canterbury Tale* are characteristic of the 20th Century post-industrial response to the metropolitan and the rural experience: the city is given associations of isolation and mobility; the countryside is a haven, and a place of honest cultivation (although Powell clearly belongs within a Romantic tradition, this is not the grand, sublime landscape of early 19th century Romanticism, but the harmonious, rustic compromise of Constable - a painter whose work did not achieve iconic status until the early 20th century). *A Canterbury Tale* champions one myth - that of the organically cohesive community - in order to resist another (one which urbanisation has made prevalent): namely the myth of a society consisting of isolated, alienated individuals. Moreover, Powell’s Kent can be seen to embody a range of values which are constructed as ‘essentially’ English and therefore unchanging (they assume an ‘eternal’ quality through association with the countryside, which is similarly constructed as a fundamentally stable entity, however much it seems to be jeopardised by the paraphernalia of war).

The urban/rural duality has an obvious artistic and literary lineage. Laurence Lerner writes that “The wish to find in country life a relief from the problems of a sophisticated society formed itself, in Renaissance times, into a set of poetic conventions. These are the conventions of the pastoral.”²⁸ A recurring feature of Western civilisation,

²⁷ Raymond Williams. *The Country and the City* (Paladin: St. Albans, 1975). p. 347.

²⁸ Laurence Lerner. *The Uses of Nostalgia: Studies in Pastoral Poetry* (Chatto & Windus: London, 1972). p. 19.

this form is both escapist and frequently nostalgic, in that it renounces the present in order to fashion an alternative. Whether it be in the form of an idealised time (the Golden Age) or an idealised place (Arcadia) this other space permits the exploration of attitudes and values which find no room in the here and now. The structure of *A Canterbury Tale* imitates that of classic Shakespearean comedy, placing a group of protagonists into a strange or exotic world to dramatise their preconceptions, their limitations and their encounters with the new or the strange. This becomes well-nigh a motif in Powell and Pressburger's work, fascinated as it is with the transition between opposed worlds, with dream states, alien territories and magical "other spaces." *The Spy in Black*, *Contraband*, *49th Parallel*, *...one of our aircraft is missing*, *I Know Where I'm Going!*, *Black Narcissus* and *The Red Shoes* can all be seen to be similarly structured, as can their last film together, *Ill Met by Moonlight* which, of course, takes its title from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The more overtly fantastic *A Matter of Life and Death* incorporates a production of that play into its narrative (while Clive Candy taunts his opponent Kaunitz in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* with an aria from *Mignon* which echoes Shakespeare "I am Titania"). Antonia Lant, who has given perhaps the most closely argued analysis of *A Canterbury Tale* so far, writes of wartime British cinema that "The blackout and the mobile woman were the basis of the new dramatic forms precisely because they were unstable, and embodied the perceptual and ideological reinventions of wartime."²⁹ In her examination of fractured, decentred representations of womanhood, and the male anxieties excited by the conscription of active women, she finds a prime metaphor for disruption in the visual destabilisation of the blackout (often, as it is here, inscribed realistically into the narrative of the film). Certainly, Alison's arrival in the village of Chillingbourne causes

²⁹ Antonia Lant, *Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Cinema* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1991), p. 219.

patriarchy (in the shape of Colpeper) to reassess its presumptions regarding the role of women in society. Yet the pastoral form of *A Canterbury Tale* illustrates that these modes of representation are not as novel as Lant suggests. Although given a nuanced topicality, Lant's "new dramatic forms" bear comparison with the renegotiations of the gender system found in Shakespeare. The lack of any clearly coded gender differentiation brought by the prevalence of the 'uniformed woman' brings with it a reassessment of femininity, just as Rosalind's cross-dressing allows for a contemplation of the construction of gender within the playful space of Arden. In *A Canterbury Tale*, both Chillingbourne and the anarchic, absolute potential of the blackout recall that forest, the enchanted woods outside Athens, and even Prospero's island. As Powell and Pressburger make clear in their shooting script: "We would like to emphasize here, particularly to Alfred Junge and Erwin Hillier, that the Railway Station and Chillingbourne village at night are only described this prosaically because, in daylight, that is what they really are. But at night they loom, awful and mysterious, full of strange shapes, stranger sounds, menacing shadows and hard corners."³⁰ Powell and Pressburger's note to the film's designer and cinematographer indicates that the 'magical' quality of the film is to be registered visually, primarily through the lighting code, while comparisons which might be suggested between Pressburger's Colpeper and Puck (both Shakespeare's and, more specifically, Kipling's) confirm the cultural tradition to which the film belongs. Of course, the terms with which they describe this awful mysterious magic are far from delightful. The name of the village, 'Chilling-bourne', illustrates the qualified nature of this magic space: despite the welcome it grants its visitors, it is a 'cold domain.' It is no *Paradise Regained*.

³⁰ The shooting script may be consulted at the B. F. I. Library, London.

Arcadia has often been imagined as a place of license (in contrast to the moral hypocrisy of the court). In its 20th century manifestation, it is the cradle of decency. Moral degeneracy being associated with the chaos of the modern city, this license is logically something the influx of unattached soldiers to Chillingbourne threatens to bring with it, and which Colpeper's puritanical campaign has striven to prevent (a departure from previously wanton incarnations of the Puck/Pan character). Indeed, this Arcadia is staunchly patriarchal, and in this sense, the film is deeply reactionary: its support of continuity and tradition manifests itself through an obsession with patrilinearity. In fact, in the character of Colpeper, the film seems to admit that a deep misogyny is implanted within the national psyche (paradoxically, Colpeper, the local embodiment of the Law, is - if we allow a perverted sexual motivation to his glue throwing fixation - also a libidinal figure, a warped eruption of unconscious drives normally kept repressed). His attitude to women is certainly striking. His approval of the ducking-stool, his curiously rationalised glue-man campaign and his refusal to accept Alison on his farm are all blatantly sexist. Patriarchy is further strengthened by the film's commitment to repeating the assumptions of male succession: Horton is proud that his father and his father's father were blacksmiths; Bob is a "Johnson of Johnson County", and he eagerly anticipates a future son; a plaque outside the village lecture hall states: "Colpeper Institute 1886. Ceded to the Borough of Chillingbourne by the former owner James Colpeper, J.P."³¹ Colpeper, too, perpetuates a tradition of masculine inheritance. In his lecture, he talks only of a fascination with the "father's house," while we might care to see in the tower of Canterbury Cathedral an architectural expression of phallic supremacy.

³¹ The quotation from John Dryden beneath this inscription reads: "Not Heav'n itself upon the past has pow'r; / But what has been, has been, and I have had my hour." This clearly has resonance for the plot of the film.

Yet Alison's strong-willed character, her platonic friendship with Bob, and her readiness to understand the importance of the past, all bring Colpeper to apologise for his misplaced attitude. He finally acknowledges that she is correct in finding it "a pity" that he had not simply invited the girls to his lectures rather than inventing the glue-man campaign. Ambiguously, it is unclear whether Colpeper is redeemed: his crimes go unpunished; but he receives no 'blessing' himself (although he is last seen entering the cathedral to do penance and seek forgiveness). In part, of course, he exists outside the 'natural' world of the film, a supernatural incarnation of Puck. As such he transcends the mortal sphere of Alison, Bob and Peter. Yet as a final endorsement of the restorative power of the film, its penultimate shot, played over the final credits, shows hordes of couples - men and women - entering the village lecture-hall together. Colpeper has at least learned the value of equality (like Candy in *Colonel Blimp* he undergoes a vital renewal). However reactionary Chillingbourne and Colpeper seem, change is always conceivable.

What remains constant in the tradition of the pastoral is the imagining of another place of possibility, where the damaged souls of the protagonists may be healed (apparently miraculously), in which the deficiencies of the present may be overcome, in which desire may be staged. Hence the individual pilgrims have their own sense of disappointment and damage, while at a national level, a social fracture is mapped out in the division the film draws between Chillingbourne and London. The crisis is summarised by Alison: "Why should people who love the country have to live in big cities? Something is wrong." It is a simplistic dilemma, but is one on which the film depends.

*

The opposition set up in *A Canterbury Tale* is that between what the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies identified as long ago as in 1887 as the *Gemeinschaft* (community) and the

Gesellschaft (society).³² The *Gemeinschaft* is a knitted, organically integrated social unit, dependent upon oral exchange and mutual interests. The *Gesellschaft* is an atomised society, composed of individual interests, commercial contracts and loose connections. Tonnies maintains that the historical development from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* is a fated transition towards utilitarianism, alienation, and goal-oriented behaviour. Chillingbourne is a model of tightly-knitted human relations, founded upon feudal structures with Colpeper as its local squire. It is entirely consistent, therefore, that the village people get their news at six o'clock when the pub opens, that Woodcock should presume that Alison must know the Lord Mayor of London on the same basis that he knows the local magistrate, and that Colpeper should have heard, though a reliable village grapevine, that the salvage boy's father has lumbago! Notably, of course, this 'village mentality' is also a recurring feature of the community-spirited Ealing comedies and dramas, and of documentaries such as *Fires Were Started* (Humphrey Jennings, 1943). These works represent tightly knit communities, and even if London-based, they extract local, manageable and romanticised districts as pseudo-villages (Pimlico, Lavender Hill...). There, it is the very smallness of the community which distinguishes it. And, of course, in the context of the Second World War, the local district stands for England - which stands for Britain - and is rendered all the more 'plucky' by virtue of its diminutive stature.

Tonnies goes on to distinguish between two distinct mind-sets: the *Wesenwille* (the natural, impulsive or 'inspired' will), which corresponds with the type of relations associated with the *Gemeinschaft*, and the *Kurwille* (the unspontaneous, intellectual and pragmatic will) which depends upon rationality and prudence and is therefore analogous

³² Ferdinand Tonnies, *Community and Society* (Harper & Row Publishers Inc: New York, 1963). Significantly, Tonnies' paean for the lost innocence of the *Gemeinschaft* failed to capture the public imagination until the years after the havoc of the First World War.

to the economically developed *Gesellschaft*. The two are deeply implicated with contrasting modes of production: the *Wesenwille* stresses the importance of craftsmanship ('the means') whereas the *Kurwille* focuses on factory production and the 'ends', the fragmented division of labour and the receipt of the pay-pocket. Stylistically, we may associate the utilitarianism of realism with the construct of the *Gesellschaft/Kurwille*, determined as it is by an adherence to the rational. By implication, therefore, the mystical nature of *A Canterbury Tale*, and much of the romanticism in the Archers' canon, belongs in Tonnies terms to the *Gemeinschaft* and the impulsive quirks of the *Wesenwille*. This is exhibited in their explorations of both the 'vocational' and the irrational: the creative artists of *The Red Shoes*, the Order of St. Faith in *Black Narcissus*, the inspired teacher in *A Canterbury Tale*, even the messianic Nazi in *49th Parallel*. Ultimately, in *Colonel Blimp*, it is the wartime expediency of the *Kurwille* which is advanced, although however much it wants to endorse the pragmatic drive, realistic behaviour and goal-oriented determinism of Spud's 'new model army', and however much it wants to dispel the attitudes of the old world order based on good manners, etiquette and form, it does so only reluctantly. As a piece of wartime propaganda, it expresses a modern approach to war, but its sadness at the loss (or temporary retirement) of Candy's values is palpable in its sentimental attachment to the old man. Its Old Tory bones are dressed in conveniently up to date attire.

Tonnies views the development *from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft* as an inescapable historical transition. He denounces nostalgia as regressive, and urges instead a modern surrender to the inevitable. Nostalgia often does express itself in an idealised and unrealistic desire to return to the organicity of *Gemeinschaft* and *A Canterbury Tale* seems reluctant to answer Tonnies' call to embrace modernity. Instead, it is ideologically dedicated to the encouragement of a shared sense of national identity, based upon values

which antedate the urban, industrialised structure of modern society. It craves a cosy re-imagination of half-timbered Englishness. As Fritz Pappenheim argues in *The Alienation of Modern Man*, “As we like to look back to the days of a warm and sheltered childhood, so we tend to hark back to the past of our society when the bonds of *Gemeinschaft* were still strong and protected those whom they enfolded.”³³ The emphasis given to childhood in *A Canterbury Tale* strengthens this nostalgic affinity between infancy and Arcadia. The relationship between Bob, whose wide-eyed innocence renders him child-like, and the village children, exemplified in their riotous mock-battle, also serves as a reminder that the pastoral form involves a retreat into what is essentially a playful space.

It is the urbane Peter who remains most immune to the spirit of the village. Peter the Londoner and Bob from Oregon are presented as the antithesis of each other (as their inverted sergeant’s stripes neatly signify). A metropolitan figure, Peter admits that he had not even noticed there was a countryside before the war, although he has enjoyed the air in Hyde Park, suggesting that at an unconscious level he possesses the soul to render him ultimately susceptible to the film’s charms. While Alison’s connection with the Kentish landscape, with the Pilgrim’s Road and with her memories of her fiancé (implicitly she lost her virginity during her caravan holiday with him three years earlier) are all vague expressions of longing, for Peter, such longings are to be achieved artistically, in his long harboured wish to play a church organ. In either case, it is the realisation of a dream which the film promotes.

Peter’s destructive platoon of bren-carriers setting out to ‘capture’ Alison with her horse and cart demonstrates his cavalier disregard for the landscape. Indeed, the film views all mechanical technology suspiciously, as something which might threaten spiritual

³³ Fritz Pappenheim, *The Alienation of Modern Man* (Modern Reader Paperbacks: London, 1968), p. 68.

values. Speed is connoted with brutality, with a lack of perception, with false values. This is in keeping with the film's romantic reification of the past and its endorsement of organic materials, ancient crafts, workshops and farming, most clearly evidenced in the Hortons' blacksmith and timber yard. Characteristically, therefore, Colpeper has an aversion to machines: although he uses his slide projector, he is unable to make it work himself; and he gently criticises Bob for his love of cinema. This nostalgia for the pre-industrial can be traced to a distinctively Victorian cultural counter-current: such medievalism is, after all, a defining characteristic of William Morris's Arts and Crafts Movement. Old Horton is part of a celebration of working yeomanry which ranges from Wordsworth's Michael, through Adam Bede and Gabriel Oak. While Horton's small-mindedness is initially mocked (he is caught out by Alison's more modern mentality), their apparent failure to communicate is an indictment of a state which permits the unnatural polarisation of its population into entirely dichotomised urban and rural spheres, rather than as an attack on Horton's own values - for Bob is able to talk with the old man, who is shown to be both sympathetic and generous to him. Bob (whose background in lumber and love of the landscape connects him to the Kentish locals through a shared rural vocabulary which ignores national boundaries) is able to assimilate himself most easily with the village community. His opposition to Peter is not, therefore, a matter of national geography. Thus, while the values which the film champions are allied with Englishness, they are through Bob internationalised, and also naturalised, offering perhaps an implicit alternative to the constructed 'artificiality' of an ideology such as Nazism. Although Nazism itself relied heavily on its own Volkish ideology and romanticised its own rural characteristics, to the British Germany was perceived as an urban dystopia. Martin Wiener notes this simple distinction: "Whereas Nazi Germany was being portrayed as an industrial society run amok, England was seen as just the opposite: humanely old

fashioned and essentially rural, the world of Mrs. Miniver and P.G. Wodehouse. Consequently the war was seen as a test of the new world versus the old.”³⁴

Alison dramatises most fully the polarisation between rural and urban lifestyles. She and Prue condemn urban existence as dispiriting and unsatisfying: they speak of the city environment as “a long street and every house a different kind of sadness in it”, and Prue’s failure to marry is directly attributable to the division between town and country (this damnation of urban life closely echoes George Orwell’s *Coming up for Air*, another tale of pastoral retreat (first published in 1939), in which the hero George sees his street as “a prison with cells all in a row, a line of semi-detached torture chambers.”³⁵ Notably, Alison’s surname (she is a ‘Smith’) does more than cast her as an Everywoman: it betokens a familial pedigree of pre-mechanised craftsmanship which connects her unconsciously with the Hortons (with whom she feels she has no rapport as a result of generations of divergence). Yet working in a department store, she has at least been able to imagine her picnic baskets in use and her deck-chairs in beautiful gardens: a suburban diminution of the pastoral urge. With the passing references to Alison’s off-screen London store, the film gestures uncomplimentarily towards a consumerist economy. Remaining unseen (like the industrialist Bellinger stranded on Kiloran in *I Know Where I’m Going!*) this world lacks vitality, and while Alison’s shopfloor longings for the country are to be applauded within the film’s rhetoric, the commodification of the pastoral she refers to is clearly yet another instance of the film’s rejection of the capitalist system. Alison’s response to Horton’s ridicule of her ignorance of the wheelwright’s craft indicates that enforced interaction between city-dwellers and villagers will ultimately

³⁴ Wiener, p. 77.

³⁵ George Orwell, *Coming up for Air* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1962), p. 14.

benefit the nation. The Women's Land Army therefore realises the conditions for ideological renewal which the film seeks to establish. Fragmentation is diagnosed; unity prescribed. Through Alison, the film strives to cement the nation together. While Colpeper grabs the opportunity, when soldiers are barracked nearby, to instruct these town dwellers about 'their' rustic heritage, Alison similarly succeeds in healing the neurotically separated gender division which the magistrate has worked to perpetuate. The goal, as with *Colonel Blimp*, is the creation of the nation as a working unit. Detained in Chillingbourne, Peter, Bob and Alison are redirected towards Canterbury as part of the film's mission to impart a singular clarity of purpose. The realisation of their dreams in the magical city of Canterbury serves as a metaphor for the achievement of this goal.

3.2.3: Connecting with Kipling

Implicit in the phrase "Why We Fight" is the need to remember, to meditate upon the latent potential and validity of a cultural heritage, and according to Powell, the specific purpose of *A Canterbury Tale* was to explain "to the Americans, and to our own people, the spiritual values and the traditions we were fighting for."³⁶ It is an agenda which closely echoes that which had been pursued by Rudyard Kipling. His poem *Recessional* (1897) expresses a similar anxiety, warning against the self-satisfied "frantic boast and foolish word" and anticipating the decline of the Empire:

Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
Is one with Ninevah and Tyre!
Judge of the Nations, spare us yet,
Lest we forget - lest we forget!

³⁶ Michael Powell, *A Life in Movies* (Mandarin: London, 1992), p. 437.

An important link exists between *A Canterbury Tale* and Kipling's later writings. The film's nostalgic ruralism corresponds with the political sentiments expressed in these works (notably *Puck of Pook's Hill*, *Rewards and Fairies* and some of the stories in *Actions and Reactions*, particularly 'An Habitation Enforced'). Ian Christie comments upon the affinity which Powell felt for Kipling.³⁷ Powell himself recollects a childhood influenced by "Edgar Wallace, Rudyard Kipling, Rider Haggard and other prolific writers of romance and adventure,"³⁸ and yet the significance of the connection goes beyond any superficial parallel between the magus-like Colpeper and Kipling's Puck (an affinity which has been noted by John Russell Taylor³⁹). Kipling's patriotic agenda and his recourse to domestic evocations of Englishness, particularly after he returned to England to live at Batemans in September 1902, resurface forty years on in the Archers' film.

The fringe of Empire, to the mythology of which Kipling had of course dramatically contributed, carried the same symbolic value as the American frontier inasmuch as it signified a place where the character of the nation's youth could be tested, the unknown conquered, masculinity proved. To this degree then, Imperial literature, the American Western, and indeed the 'How We Fight' battle film fulfil a similar, 'heroic' function (this is the popular fiction to which *Colonel Blimp* gestures in its allusions to Korda's imperial epics). In the Edwardian era, anxiety regarding internal weaknesses (the condition of the poor, and a suspicion of urban degeneracy) brought a lack of confidence in the reviving power of the frontier, and led to an ideological re-colonisation of the

³⁷ Ian Christie, *Arrows of Desire: The Films of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger* (Faber & Faber: London, 1994), p. 6.

³⁸ Powell, p. 70.

³⁹ John Russell Taylor, 'Michael Powell: Myths and Supermen', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 47 no. 4, Autumn 1978, pp. 226-229.

English countryside in order to bolster the Empire from within. With Kipling's resettlement, as David Trotter has illustrated, "the South of England replaces the Punjab as the scene for rites of passage which disclose and sustain an Imperial spirit."⁴⁰ Just as Kipling moved from the Imperial fringe to its hub, so the cinema of the Second World War, conscious of its home audience, concentrates on the Home Front to make films which distil propaganda of rejuvenation while avoiding scenes of overt militarism or jingoism (it is notable how few films made during the war include scenes of combat). However, as Trotter points out, home and foreign policy are intrinsically linked: "A regenerative mythology binds centre to periphery, and makes the one dependent on the other."⁴¹ Kipling's centripetal dynamic sought to discover the imperial spirit, like Powell and Pressburger, in the history and landscape of the English countryside, on whose soil it had been engendered.⁴²

His is an outsider's perspective. T.S. Eliot, another immigrant, acknowledged a sense of kinship with Kipling here. In an address to The Kipling Society given in 1958, Eliot admits: "Kipling's attitude to things English, like mine, was in some ways different from that of any native-born Briton."⁴³ From a very different political perspective, of course, Orwell also brought a stranger's view, noting the strong cultural sense of an unbroken history in *The Lion and The Unicorn*, his own much cited calibration of the national scene. "English culture," he decides, "...is somehow bound up with solid

⁴⁰ David Trotter, 'Kipling's England: The Edwardian Years', in Phillip Mallett (ed.), *Kipling Considered* (Macmillan: London, 1989), p. 59.

⁴¹ Trotter, p. 58.

⁴² In Kipling's poem "A Charm" which prefaces *Rewards and Fairies* a magical quality is invested upon the English soil: "Lay that earth upon thy heart./ And thy sickness shall depart!"

⁴³ T.S.Eliot, 'The Unfading Genius of Rudyard Kipling', first published in *The Kipling Journal*, Volume XXVI, Number 29, March 1959, pp. 9-12. Reprinted in Eliot L. Gilbert (ed.), *Kipling and the Critics* (Peter Owen: London, 1966), p. 120.

breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar-boxes. It has a flavour of its own. Moreover it is continuous, it stretches into the future and the past.”⁴⁴ Written during the Blitz in 1940 and first published the following year, Orwell’s fresh response to the image of the nation brought together in war shows his own susceptibility to the dominant national myths of the English.

In *Puck of Pook’s Hill*, (which was first published in 1906) the establishment of the English race is mythologised. The children, Dan and Una are performing a piece from *A Midsummer Nights Dream* in their local meadow when they meet and are bewitched by the spirit-guide Puck. Like many of the characters Puck introduces them to, the children are knitted into the cultural fabric of the nation’s history (Puck’s strategy, therefore, anticipates Colpeper’s initiation of Alison, Bob and Peter through the ritual baptism of the glue-attack). The voice of Puck magically links past and present, just as Colpeper’s lecture series and slide-shows aim to do, while Colpeper’s keen walking and mountaineering, and his love of gardening, perpetuate his role as a spirit of nature. As the film progresses Colpeper takes on his own mystical qualities. His impassioned lecture regarding his affinity with “the old England” is shown to mesmerise and inspire Alison (an effect cued by the musical soundtrack which accompanies a close-up of her face - her closed eyes signifying her imagination taking flight). She later experiences for herself Colpeper’s mystical communion with the past. After Alison seems to hear the medieval pilgrims on the Old Road (something which Colpeper’s lecture has encouraged), she hears a disembodied voice call to her, “Glorious, isn’t it?” before he rises from the grass to show himself. Like Puck, it seems, Colpeper materialises and vanishes at will. In the same sequence, Colpeper assures her that if they lie flat on top of the hill they will not be seen

⁴⁴ George Orwell. ‘The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius’, reprinted in *The Penguin Essays of George Orwell* (Penguin: London, 1984), p. 145.

by Bob and Peter. Later, after speaking to Alison at the Canterbury Garage where her caravan is being stored, he disappears without explanation and apparently magically.

The name 'Colpeper' is itself meaningful. Being "an occupational name for a herbalist or spicer", some vague connection with either astrology or alchemy might be ventured, strengthening the quasi-mystical nature of his character.⁴⁵ Colpeper gnomically assures Alison that "miracles still happen", and it is allowed that he may be the force behind the "blessings" which the protagonists receive. A momentary intensity is created in the close-up which records Alison's reaction to his assurance - the camera lingers on her face just long enough to hint that belief in magical powers are being entertained. Moreover, a real Nicholas Culpepper (1616-1654), a physician and writer on astrology and medicine, is featured as a fictionalised character in "A Doctor of Medicine" (one of the tales in *Rewards and Fairies*, Kipling's sequel to *Puck*), reinforcing the connection between the texts.⁴⁶ In this tale, Nicholas Culpepper tells Dan and Una how he diagnosed the cause of the plague and hence saved a village from contamination. Tom Colpeper, also working to ameliorate the health of the nation, is his spiritual descendent.

In "The Young Men at the Manor" (from *Puck*) the Norman knight Sir Richard is brought within the Saxon community and is recruited to take concerted action against their common enemy. The song he sings revolves around the refrain, "England hath taken me",⁴⁷ a sentiment clearly close to Pressburger's own experience. Kipling's short story

⁴⁵ Patrick Hanks and Flavia Hodges *A Dictionary of Surnames* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1988). The name derives from the Middle English 'cull (en)': to pluck, pick, and 'peper' (Old English: 'piper') pepper.

⁴⁶ See Stanley J. Kunitz & Howard Haycroft, *British Authors Before 1800: A Biographical Dictionary* (H. W. Wilson Company: New York, 1952).

⁴⁷ Rudyard Kipling, *Puck of Pook's Hill* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1987), p. 76 (this text was, incidentally, first published in 1906).

“An Habitation Enforced” (in the collection from 1919, *Actions and Reactions*) again details the acquisition of nationality through immersion in rural England.⁴⁸ Here, an American millionaire, George Chapin, and his wife Sophie, retreat to the English countryside, finding in Rocketts Farm “the genuine England of folklore and song.”⁴⁹ Their induction into the local culture is echoed by Bob’s in *A Canterbury Tale*, their initial confusion, and hatred of tea drinking anticipating the G.I.’s difficulties with mirrors and telephones. Sophie’s judgement is tellingly like Bob’s: England is “Wonderful, but no explanation.”⁵⁰

Settling in the area, the Chapin’s buy the estate, acquire baronial responsibilities, and after the birth of a baby boy, discover that Sophie’s genealogy can be traced back to the village. Their return to Sophie’s roots, and the birth of a boy-child, ensure that continuity is restored. In a decisive gesture towards ensuring the longevity of the estate, George agrees that the bridge over the brook should be made of long-lasting oak, rather than larch. The declamation “By Oak and Ash and Thorn!”, of course, figures prominently in *Puck*, and the care of timber (as an organic, honest activity) plays a key role in *A Canterbury Tale* (“You can’t hurry an elm”).

Just as the birth of George and Sophie Chapin’s child offers a conventional image of hope to conclude ‘An Habitation Enforced’ so *Puck* culminates in the optimism of the “Children’s Song”, an antidote to the cultural degeneration which Kipling felt jeopardised the Empire. Significantly, the closing credits of *A Canterbury Tale* are played over footage of the village boys playing football: although cued by the film narrative (the ball

⁴⁸ Likewise, the story “My Son’s Wife” follows a dysfunctional urbanite, Midmore, who finds spiritual healing in the shires.

⁴⁹ Rudyard Kipling, *Short Stories: Volume One* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1971), p. 119.

⁵⁰ Kipling (1971), p. 122.

is the boys' reward for helping Bob), the images of teamwork and childhood clearly provide the film with a confident resolution and push home its rejuvenating objective. Yet this hope is rooted in the solidity of history and can obviously be read as deeply reactionary. Like *A Canterbury Tale*, Kipling's praise of honest work and yeomanry (Weland's sword in Puck is an example of such craftsmanship) marks an evasion of modernity which is symptomatic of contemporary malaise. Kipling's world-view is, in Preben Kaarsholm's words, "a deeply depressed and neurotic one ... of a society where the trend towards anomie and total alienation can only be countered by an authoritarian traditionalism."⁵¹ Like *A Canterbury Tale*, it marks a regression to *Gemeinschaft*.

It was the discovery in the garden at Batemans of Roman, Jacobean and Cromwellian objects which stimulated Kipling's interest in English history. Both *Puck* and *Rewards and Fairies* feature relics which act as concrete symbols of the co-existence of past and present. They are embodiments of a cultural memory. The optimism of *A Canterbury Tale* is built upon the past, of which the archaeological artefacts in the film are material fragments. This affinity between *Paradise Lost* and an anticipated Utopia is clearly an intimate one. Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase have pointed out that "The counterpoint to the imagined future is the imagined past. But there is one crucial respect in which the power of the past is different. It has generated objects, images and texts which can be seen as powerful talismans of how things used to be."⁵² The stone in the Chillingbourne inn, and Alison's coins, represent for her a personal memory (one painfully associated with bereavement and isolation), rather than a shared heritage. Her donation

⁵¹ Preben Kaarsholm, 'Kipling and Masculinity', in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity: Volume Three: National Fictions* (Routledge: London, 1989), p. 208.

⁵² Christopher Shaw & Malcolm Chase, *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1989), p. 9.

of the coins to the museum marks their transition from the private to the public sphere, her act seeming to trigger a round of applause from the crowd (the soldiers are actually cheering the repair of the projector, although the film applauds her gesture). The donation confirms her integration within the fabric of the nation - establishes her shared cultural identity and, by extension, her progress towards redemption. In Colpeper's custodianship, the coins (synecdochic substitutes for Alison herself) occupy an historically significant position within his collection and within the collective, racial consciousness which the museum represents. In the museum they can be put to public use, educating visitors to the village.

The symbolic function of the donation also serves as an anticipation of Alison's reaction to the news of her fiancé's survival. Like the coins, the caravan represents a private memory, a fetishised souvenir which she has coveted. The film does not advocate the preservation of the past for its own sake: its nostalgia is not elegiac, and the 'history' which it embraces is an expression of cultural vigour. The jacked-up, moth-eaten caravan, like the privately treasured coins, like Miss Haversham's decaying wedding feast, is a ghostly reminder of a dead past, a burdensome inheritance which with the news of Geoffrey's return can be shaken off. Alison's desperate cry in the caravan, "I must open the windows!" is echoed by Pip's similar invocation at the end of David Lean's *Great Expectations* (1946) - each act endorses the future (a new dawn coded through the influx of light), and like Googie Wither's destruction of her husband's haunted mirror in the Robert Hamer section of Ealing's *Dead of Night* (1945) it marks an escape from the strangle-hold of a destructive and negatively interpreted cultural memory.

3.2.4: Marks of Resistance: Anti-Realism / Realism / Documentary

At this stage, it might be objected that the very 'quirkiness' of *A Canterbury Tale*, epitomised in the putative narrative of the glue-man's attacks on local girls, sits uncomfortably with Erwin Hillier's edenic and resonant images of the Kentish Weald (initial reviews of the film were divided between praise of the cinematography and performances and, at best, a suspicion of the storyline⁵³). Indeed, the film's ideological commitment to the subjectivisation of an all-embracing national identity might well be seen to be jeopardised by the perversely distancing, Hoffmannesque eccentricities of the plot. Jarring stylistic or narrative oddities surely disrupt the process of ideological reinforcement which is at the heart of mainstream cinema's national agenda, depending as it tends to on processes of identification rather than of estrangement? In the context of Tonnies, *A Canterbury Tale*'s irrational aspects are very much in keeping with the film's subscription to the impulses of the *Wesenwille*. Nevertheless, the overarching ideological thrust of the film ultimately incorporates the paradoxical nature of its narrative (although cannot do so smoothly). I would not suggest that the film-makers endorse Colpeper's misogynistic glue-throwing campaign. Rather, I would argue that the narrative drive of the film actively marginalises and in the last instance dismisses as irrelevant the investigations undertaken to expose the magistrate. The film's investment is in the irrational, in the spiritual or the supernatural (and in matters which are felt emotionally). As such it romantically eschews the discipline of rationalism. The initial enigma upon

⁵³ Ernest Betts in *The Sunday Express* (14.5.44) calls the film "brilliant, beautiful but baffling", but finally asks "Is this film about Anglo American relations, is it a hymn to England, or what?" Similarly, William Whitebait in *The New Statesman* (13.5.44) finds that although the film "is as good as a day in the country" he carried away from *A Canterbury Tale* "an enjoyment that (he) was loath to examine too closely". It was thus the narrative to which these critics took exception. Critics in the popular and regional papers generally took less exception to the glue-man story, and praised the cinematography. See the B.F.I. Library microfiche files on *A Canterbury Tale*.

which the hermeneutics of the plot depend, namely the secret of the glue-man's identity, is quickly answered. The film spectator is privileged with the early disclosure of Colpeper smiling with self-reproach for "showing a light" from his courtroom, having failed to secure his blackout in his rush to avoid capture. The quest for knowledge is thus relegated in favour of a quest for "Truth"; or put more candidly, Colpeper's sadistic misogyny is disregarded in the interests of discovering and validating the motives behind his strategy. His earlier chauvinism is sanctioned: his ends justify his means. Kevin Macdonald has noted the debt which the curious "non-plot" of *A Canterbury Tale* owes to G.K.Chesterton's *The Club of Queer Trades*, a collection of what are nominally detective stories, in which apparent crimes are revealed not to be so.⁵⁴ Like *A Canterbury Tale*, Chesterton pits ratiocination (embodied in his narrator Rupert Grant's logical need to decipher what to him are inexplicable events) against the mysticism and inspiration of his brother Basil. In what amount to parodies of Sherlock Holmes deductive techniques, Rupert's astonishment at the behaviour of "madmen" is comically revealed to be naive when contrasted with Basil's more ready acceptance of the peculiar.

A Canterbury Tale's similar dismissal of detective work is vividly illustrated in the sequence which follows Colpeper's lecture. Returning to the blacked-out exterior (and to the 'plot' of the film), Bob discloses the evidence he has collected regarding the gluemans identity. The stammering 'village idiot' whom he interrogates clearly undermines the seriousness of his detective work. Being held in long-shot until the close of the sequence, the 'idiot' is accompanied by a mocking cuckoo-call on the soundtrack. This remarkably staged presentation of a clichéd 'type' of villager alienates the spectator by underscoring the artificiality of the film as a whole. A further distancing is

⁵⁴ Kevin Macdonald, *Emeric Pressburger: The Life and Death of a Screenwriter* (Faber & Faber: London, 1994), p. 237.

experienced by the spectator keen enough to notice that the 'idiot' is played by Esmond Knight, who has been seen in a cameo role as the 'Seven Sisters Road' soldier in the scene immediately preceding this one. The sequence signifies an active, narrative irony (indeed cruelty) which removes us from the lucid immediacy of the rural footage, particularly as the sequence takes place on an obvious studio set.⁵⁵ For Wordsworth, this isolated, untutored rustic type might have been a Romantic idealisation of stoicism, honest natural passion and mystic wonderment - delineated simply, with a lack of artifice, in the language of the 'Common Man'. Clearly, the incongruously injected tone here is, however, one of metropolitan superiority, and its attitude to the 'idiot' an undeniably patrician instance of cavalier authorship.

Like the 'Glue-man' plot, the village idiot sequence will not readily be knitted into the film's predominantly effusive representation of Englishness. Significantly, it is the courtly sophisticate, Peter, who identifies the stammering old man to us as the 'village idiot'. Peter is the melancholy Jacques of the film, out of place in Kent - although unlike Jacques he does not admit to any dissatisfaction with the Court. His cynical disdain isolates him in Chillingbourne. He is the most resistant to the curative properties of the countryside, a staunch exemplar of the *Kurwille* (Peter's Sunday afternoon debate with Colpeper, who is the embodiment of all the idealistic high-mindedness that he claims to oppose, is a vivid illustration of this). It is characteristic of the film that it remains equivocal about its representation of the village (just as its name "Chillingbourne" contradicts its idyllic appearance). While seduced by the Englishness, the film retains enough cosmopolitanism to sound a superior and questioning note. The tension is

⁵⁵ Douglas McVey argues that the "the mocking of the yokel ... does possess equivocal, vestigially sadistic overtones, like so many aspects of the Powell canon." See Douglas McVey, 'Michael Powell: Three Neglected Films', *Films and Filming*, no. 328, 1982, p. 19.

between an immediate and subjectively felt attachment and a clinical detachment. Esmond Knight's anonymous and extra-diegetic voice-over in the opening 'Prologue' to the film, which is accompanied by extreme long-shots of the Kentish scenery and of a passing locomotive, establishes the distanced, objective perspective (it has a documentary feel to it). Elsewhere, Chillingbourne, and Canterbury, remain seductive. The treatment of the 'idiot' - together with the identity of the gluelman - mark a genuine 'faultline' (in Alan Sinfield's sense that they expose real ideological contradiction).⁵⁶ Such cases of textual sadism critique, through association, the totalitarianism of Chillingbourne's apparently ancient feudal structure. The connection between Colpeper (symbol of continuity) and the Gluelman (symbol of misogyny, yes, but more generally of all ideological coercion - and his glue is very much deployed as social cement) is mystified in the darkness of the blackout, and in the last instance the narrative strives to bring the connection to light. The sadistic mocking of the 'village idiot' is done in a fashion so artificial as to foreground the authors' own highly culpable assumption of dubious authority - yet all the while this critical reading of Chillingbourne vies with the genial presentation of sunny village life. Only the magical resolution offered at Canterbury can hold the film together.

The sturdy yeoman (Colpeper in his garden); the jolly blacksmith, the matronly landlady, the barman: *A Canterbury Tale* fondly relies upon such hackneyed types. Raphael Samuel considers that with such figures of national myth, "one is confronted not by realities which become fictions, but rather by fictions which, by dint of their popularity, become realities in their own right."⁵⁷ Indeed, the film depends upon a familiarity with these types: within the village milieu which forms the *mise-en-scène* of this fantasised

⁵⁶ Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1992).

⁵⁷ Raphael Samuel, 'Introduction' in Samuel (ed.), p. xxvii.

England, they are the *dramatis personae* of the nation. To this extent, the “village idiot” sequence is a self-reflexive confession on the film’s behalf that it has hitherto relied heavily on such ‘typical’ representations. The unmediated realism which has so far characterised much of the presentation of Chillingbourne is here undermined, for until this moment, many of the images in the film have been remarkably similar to those we might expect from documentary films of the period.

There are indeed strong similarities here to the work of Humphrey Jennings (the most romantic and individual of Grierson’s disciples), despite the intellectual, left-wing political orthodoxy from which he emerges. While Powell’s patrician, country-shires upbringing concurs with what Kevin Macdonald defines as Pressburger’s “basically old-fashioned Anglican Tory” vision, Jennings’ values (and those of Grierson’s documentary movement) remain those of democratic socialism.⁵⁸ ‘Heritage’ England is not the sole province of Old Toryism, and nostalgia is as much a part of the left-wing tradition: each places the community above the individual, each has at times reified the past, and each stands in opposition to brands of muscular libertarianism. What unites *A Canterbury Tale* and the films of Jennings is the Utopian appeal each makes in order to fulfil their ideological functioning. Jennings is primarily an urban poet, of course (Blake is his spiritual forefather).⁵⁹ His films *Words for Battle* (1941), *Heart of Britain* (1941) and *Listen to Britain* (1942, co-directed by Stewart McAllister) incorporate evocative footage of blitzed cityscapes - scenes which closely compare with Powell’s shots of bombed-out streets in Canterbury - yet Jennings fuses into these images pictures of conventional rural landscapes. In *Listen to Britain*, he returns rhythmically to shots of trees and wheatfields,

⁵⁸ Macdonald, p. 233.

⁵⁹ This point is usefully made by Jeffrey Richards and Anthony Aldgate (they also note the link between Jennings and Powell). See Richards & Aldgate, p. 55.

matched to the sound of spitfires to evoke through an audio-visual marriage a synthesised expression of the country united.⁶⁰ These ripe harvest images of late summer suggest a national/natural abundance and fecundity in exactly the same way as *A Canterbury Tale* depicts the late August richness of (appropriately) the 'Garden of England'. Each presents the countryside as a ludic space too, *Words for Battle* including footage of (presumably evacuated) children playing in boats, a sequence which mirrors the mock naval battle in Chillingbourne, and similar games played by Dan and Una in Kipling's *Puck of Pooks Hill*. Yet, critically, where Jennings presents a seamless melding of urban and rural experience - the voice-over in *Heart of Britain* harmoniously merges the agrarian with the industrial by invoking "the valleys of power and the rivers of industry" over shots of both the Pennines and northern English factories - in *A Canterbury Tale*, a rupture between the urban and the rural is diagnosed, and the narrative is driven by the need to re-suture the wound.

With both its 'travelogue' characteristics and the idealistic drive towards creating a united national identity, then, *A Canterbury Tale* borders on the territory of the documentary movement. The affinity is strengthened with the casting of U.S. Sergeant John Sweet to play Bob Johnson. While Sweet is clearly an actor (this was his only film) his presence as a genuine American serviceman belongs to the tradition followed within the documentary movement of using real people as types to achieve a supposed representative authenticity, (for example, Humphrey Jennings' *Fires Were Started*). The story of a land-girl similarly reproduces a familiar wartime documentary format in which the contribution played in the war effort by a particular defence service (or military wing) is profiled. Such portraits logically follow 1930s documentaries, such as Cavalcanti's

⁶⁰ See M. Smith, 'Narrative and Ideology in Listen to Britain', in Jeremy Hawthorn (ed.), *Narrative: From Malory to Motion Pictures* (Edward Arnold: London, 1985). Smith gives a detailed account of the operations at work in the film, paying particular attention to its interplay of sound and image tracks.

Coal Face (1935) which express the dignity of labour and praise the part played by industry in furthering the nation's fortunes (where the ideological thrust might be seen as the urban left-wing corollary of the Old Tory's valorisation of the countryside - industry is sanctioned, although in the working-class consciousness and the admiration of the productive male body which such documentaries construct there is still an inevitable degree of idealised romanticisation).

Although the generally accepted critical history of 'British National Cinema' has rightly set a distance between the Archers and the documentary form, there are key moments of crossover. The opening sequence of *A Matter of Life and Death*, for example, may well commence with images of the universe and a quirky jokiness, but as we approach from outer-space and fall towards England (the voice-over guiding us through a "real English fog") an aural montage picking out snippets of morse-code, foghorns, B.B.C. radio and Churchill speeches catches the tone of Jennings' *Listen to Britain*, with the voice-over commanding us to "Listen to all the noises in the air. Listen. Listen." (while the suggested echo of *The Tempest*, where another isle is full of noises, allows *A Matter of Life and Death* to retain its mix of magic).

There are moments of genuine documentary in Powell and Pressburger's careers. In 1941, Powell produced, directed and photographed a five minute documentary short film *An Airman's Letter to his Mother*. Narrated by John Gielgud, its text is taken from a letter written by a bomber squadron pilot and published posthumously at the request of his station commander who "felt that the letter might bring comfort to other mothers, and that everyone in our country would feel proud to read its sentiments which support an average airman in the execution of his present arduous duties." The letter expresses a patriotic discourse, advancing noble sentiments of duty and sacrifice, praising the Empire's raising of standards of civilisation: it is thus steeped in typical values of national wartime

ideology. The images Powell selects to enrich the text anticipate the territory of *A Canterbury Tale*. The opening shot is of rural English scenery; a postman delivers the letter to an idyllic country cottage; inside the cottage we see a dog (Powell's own), a traditional image, of course, of loyalty, devotion and companionship. As Gielgud's voice narrates the airman's thoughts, the camera pans slowly around his room, scanning over his belongings. Unsurprisingly, pictures of T.E. Lawrence, Scott and Nelson are picked out, masculine heroes of Empire and of romantic adventure. Among the books scattered around the room are *Scott's Last Expedition*, *The Pilot's Book of Everest*, *Explorers All*, the collected poems of John Masefield and guidebooks of England: later, Colpeper's study will be strewn with similar guidebooks, walking and mountaineering material, and books on gardening (one such being entitled *Soil and Sense*). As the airman's letter concludes, the images dissolve to the window, to trees and then to clouds, and as if its director could not resist injecting a characteristically unrealistic, animated 'cinematic effect', as the 'Last Post' is heard on the soundtrack these clouds transform themselves into the R.A.F.'s winged insignia.

A quizzically guarded interaction with the documentary form is further illustrated in Powell and Pressburger's wartime 'documentary' style two-reeler, *The Volunteer*, starring Ralph Richardson (nominally playing himself) and Pat McGrath as his dresser Fred. Made by The Archers for the Ministry of Information, it is dedicated to the Fleet Air Arm (in keeping with the wartime recruitment documentary style). What marks the film out is its odd mixture of theatricality within the documentary format. This is realistically justified as coverage of Richardson's own acting career, of course. Furthermore, the metamorphosis which military training brings to Fred is the familiar territory of propaganda of this kind, which typically stresses the increasing team work, efficiency, and the acquisition of skills necessary to the nation. However, the film also

displays Powell and Pressburger's fascination with a "magic" which is part of Richardson's theatricality and is equally inherent in their own highly cinematic style. Opening with footage of Richardson blacking up to play Othello, a marked gap between reality and appearance is coded into the film, while the shift into another realm (of make-believe) is paralleled by the journey into the unknown instigated by the outbreak of war. "It's the end of one world and the beginning of another," Richardson reflects. *The Volunteer's* status as film is scored into its text with a cut to Denham studios. Here the national cinema's response to war is satirised ("At the outbreak of war actors dived into historical costumes and declaimed powerful speeches about the wooden walls of England") while Richardson points out the unrealistic nature of the medium: "Odd things happen in film studios: trees blossom in October; you see daffodils and iris on the tables in restaurants." Nevertheless, mainly through location footage, a paradoxical commitment to documentary realism persists: as Fred is incorporated into his regiment, his individuality is effaced and a group identity is forged (thus, Richardson, looking for Fred, shouts out "There he is! Two thousand of him!"). Later, a tracking shot of an audience of uniformed men and women gathered to watch a troop company concert is very much in the style of Jennings' wartime work (and of Ealing Studio's classically group-oriented aesthetic). But backstage, as Richardson corrects Fred's make up, a close-up dissolve magically shows Fred's theatrical change into character before his performance. Powell and Pressburger thus equivocate between the realistic demands of the genre and their personal attachment to an illusionistic cinema rooted in fantasy. They suggest, in fact, that fantasy as a category is something through which social commitment and political interaction may be worked through (it is not divorced from reality, as left-wing ideologues might have argued). In *The Volunteer's* whimsical interplay between two distinct cinematic languages, the ideological division between the filmmakers' characteristically romantic

outlook and the more sober discourse of 'national cinema' is clearly exposed. It is the gentle humour and eccentricity of Richardson's persona which eliminates the potential friction between the two.

Pressburger's script, of course, allows for the possibility of real magic, while never abandoning entirely the expected language of realism. Thus, Richardson's astonishment at Fred's fully trained efficiency on his ship causes him to joke "I'd call it a miracle," to which Fred replies, "'Appens every day here sir!" Later, the work uses a film within a film actively to interrogate links between cinema and propaganda. We see cans of film footage being brought ashore, and this newsreel footage (nominally of Fred's regiment in Algiers and then of his ship in action) is projected to the troops within *The Volunteer*: silent location footage of Algiers harbour is thus seen within the film, although the status of this 'interior narrative' is manipulated: it is, for example, accompanied by Allan Gray's music soundtrack from the 'frame' narrative. At times the apparatus of the makeshift cinema is foregrounded, while at others we are shown the newsreel in an unmediated fashion, no longer clearly 'bracketed' by the text of *The Volunteer*. Significantly, the frame narrative is dispensed with as the newsreel footage progresses to cover action footage of the ship at war (dramatically magnifying the immediacy and the excitement of the sequence) and in one moment of *cinéma vérité*, the newsreel camera is obviously dropped). But the veracity of these scenes is qualified once more in the final sequence with Michael Powell's own appearance in the film. In a crowd outside Buckingham Place, where Richardson and his daughter see Fred being decorated, Powell boldly appears with his camera and takes a photograph (like any other London tourist). The film cuts to a shot of Powell's photograph of Richardson and Fred, placed as a souvenir on Fred's mantelpiece. Powell's presence plays with the supposed objectivity of the realistic form of film making, and these many sophisticated levels of cinematic articulation imbue the

work with a double characteristic: it is the documentary of the Fleet Air Arm it claims to be; and is also a highly self-conscious, self-critical and meta-cinematic exploration of the ways in which cinematic meaning is accrued.

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In the narrative fiction of *A Canterbury Tale*, this same dialogue with the documentary form is in operation. Despite the affiliation with the documentary form which its realistic footage illustrates, Powell and Pressburger shift the style of their film to interrogate modes of film representation. By exploiting the properties of light and darkness, the film self-reflexively points to connections between the cinematic apparatus itself and the desire of its protagonists: the extended blackout sequences, and the transition to the light of Canterbury clearly have a cinematically symbolic significance, while in the cinema-like atmosphere of Colpeper's lecture series, his rhetoric is shown casting its imaginative spell upon Alison. Earlier, of course, Colpeper has criticised Bob's cinephilia (suggesting it would be a pity if all Bob saw of England were movies). Later Bob's buddy Mickey (who first sees Bob through the viewfinder of his cine-camera in Canterbury) witnesses the world go by as if in the movies. This underlining of the film's material, *filmic* status clearly undoes its documentary pretensions. Taken with Colpeper's inability to operate his slide projector, the film would seem to be critiquing the inauthenticity of the cinematic experience and those who passively submit to it. There is an inconsistency here, for elsewhere in the film Powell and Pressburger characteristically celebrate the properties of their chosen medium. Of course Colpeper uses his slide projector educationally, and silhouetted in the brilliant beam he is given a mystical property, befitting the idealistic form of cinema he embodies. A similar moment of meta-cinema is to be found in *A Matter of Life and Death*, where the 'Law', in the form of Dr. Reeves with his panopticon, is linked to a voyeurism which looks forward to *Peeping Tom*.

The opening 'Prologue' sequence of *A Canterbury Tale* blatantly subverts the stylistic properties of documentary realism (the defining characteristic of which was location shooting. Commencing with shots of older texts (a manuscript, a medieval map, a woodcut print of Chaucer's pilgrims) it then presents an immediately realistic observation of rural Kent, yet the scene is shifted back some six centuries by showing Chaucer's pilgrims on their way to Canterbury, forsaking the contemporaneity of documentary-style locations. A temporal elision is then effected by the well known matched cut from the falcon to the spitfire, and from pilgrim to soldier (played by the same actor to stress the continuity of the English race). In itself, this cut exposes the spurious veracity afforded by the use of real locations. The self-conscious parading of cinematic technique distances the film further from schools of orthodox realism - the cut is an effect Brecht might have admired.

Given that the film questions the nature of 'historical progress' (like *Colonel Blimp*, where time is manipulated through a highly cinematic flashback), it is worth pausing to consider the full implications of this flamboyant piece of editing. To match the falcon with the spitfire is to suggest that time is something which can magically be made pliable and is to comment reflexively upon the film medium's very existence in time: without devices such as the split screen or the dissolve, events cannot be shown concurrently; and, without clearly coded punctuation demarking a flashback, events can generally be assumed to take place in a strict chronological order. There is thus an implicitly logical linearity to what is termed 'classical' cinema. *A Canterbury Tale*'s match-cut functions as a blatant underscoring of narrative/cinematic technique, a naked piece of authorial manipulation which unexpectedly disturbs the viewer's sense of unimpeded engagement with the smooth-flowing text. There are well-rehearsed theoretical ramifications to this of course. Set against the ideologically suspect nature of

popular mainstream cinema with its supposedly invisible continuity editing, Powell and Pressburger's forcible intrusion upon their text violates the verity that all signs of discursive process should be masked. Interestingly, the unpublished shooting script to *A Canterbury Tale* indicates that authorship was originally to be doubly-inscribed into the text of the film, as Chaucer himself was to be shown writing notes during the 'Prologue' sequence. *Colonel Blimp* contains a similar selection of obvious cinematic effects, and its presentation of history is marked by pronounced discontinuities and accelerations. By incorporating their own authorial status so visibly, Powell and Pressburger identify their text as one engaged in an always contemporary discourse with their current audience, rather than as one marked by the spurious illusions of cinematic realism. As such they problematise the objectivity and factuality of the "history" they seem to present, while at the same time the celebrate the "spectacular" nature of cinema (*Colonel Blimp*, as we have seen, similarly pirouettes its way through English history).

Nevertheless, any 'progressive reading' marked by the putative disruption of classical linearity is compromised by a competing conservatism which is also characteristic of the Archers: 'dramatic' though the montage may be, it at the same time suggests a continuity - the cut suggests both a similarity and a separation, with the precision of the match from hawk to spitfire binding together past and present in a deeply reactionary way. It is not just that a causal relationship is offered, the former event leading tidily to the latter, although an historical continuum is certainly suggested. Implicitly, according to the hypothesis of the so-called 'Kuleshov effect', the montage of any two shots causes the viewer to interpret the relationship between the two, and thereby to redefine the meaning of each shot. The sense of one informs the sense of the other, so the understanding of the earlier image is determined only insofar as it relates to the subsequent shot. The Kuleshov effect casts the cinematic spectator as a genuine dialectician. Expressed historically in *A*

Canterbury Tale, the slick visual trick effects a timebending synthesis between medieval feudal society and the RAF, something which is critically significant in a film which advocates an inter-relatedness between now and then, and which seeks to identify the spirituality of the Chaucerian pilgrimage with the war effort. At a stylistic level, *A Canterbury Tale* incorporates an oddity which criticises the empirical certainties of the *Gesellschaft*, applauds the irrationality of the *Wesenwille* and endorses through cinematic flair the ‘magic’ potential of the pastoral. It creates an anti-rationalistic climate in which Powell and Pressburger’s drive towards ideal conclusions is more readily facilitated.

3.2.5: We’re off to see the Wizard

The social and psychological disjunctures which the film portrays find a resolution which achieves the ideal optimism of fairy tale. As Colpeper learns to accept that his chauvinistic attitude towards Alison is unjustified, so an awakened recognition of the countryside brings recuperation and reorientation to the film’s three modern pilgrims, and their miraculous epiphanies become a source of wider invigoration to the nation at large. The film thus concludes on an unashamedly Utopian note. Alison learns that her fiancé, missing in action, has been found in Gibraltar; Bob receives the letters he has been expecting from his girl; and Peter, about to join his platoon on active service, is given the opportunity to play to his comrades on the cathedral organ. Their spiritual crises having been overcome through the operation of quasi-divine forces, they are brought together in the climactic cathedral service, where the Utopianism compares well with Blakean vision which underpins Humphrey Jennings’ work. Where Jennings’ *Listen to Britain* closes on a rendition of “Rule Britannia” to a montage of factories, wheatfields and clouds, *A Canterbury Tale* concludes with a triumphant rendition of “Onward Christian Soldiers”

and the peel of the cathedral bells (*Colonel Blimp* similarly ends in a major key once its crises are resolved - there we hear Spud's off-screen army approaching to an accompanying military march; in *A Canterbury Tale* we are shown the platoon marching through Canterbury's packed streets). Like *Listen to Britain*, *A Canterbury Tale* creates an air of mystical religiosity. This readiness to rouse a mood of fantasy or enchantment is characteristic of Powell. From *The Edge of the World* onwards, his interest in myths, his impressionistic preoccupation with interiority, and his fascination with the unconscious retain a potentially 'magical' ambience which is never wholly reducible to psychological explanation.

The anticipation of a New Jerusalem in the closing reel of *A Canterbury Tale* matches its nostalgic affirmation of feudal values. The idealised future it foresees is founded upon an idealised past. Canterbury Cathedral denotes continuity and is a relic of pre-capitalist society. Yet at key moments in the text (underscored by Allan Gray's pulsating choral refrain on the soundtrack) this historical symbol is elevated to become a sign of transcendence. While 'nostalgia' may express nothing more than a discontent with modernity, in its original meaning it expresses homesickness, a want of plenitude, and a desire to *re-mystify* the world. Significantly, despite the ecclesiastical imagery in *A Canterbury Tale*, its transcendent regime is not couched purely in Christian terms. The agent of redemption, Colpeper, has a faith which is quasi-mystical (significantly, we do not see him at the village church service, although he does join the cathedral service in the closing moments of the film). The values which Colpeper champions are fundamentally pantheistic; his 'powers' are supernatural. If the critical disquiet meted out to the film is evidence of its apparently awkward and morally problematical apology for Colpeper's nocturnal terrorism (and for the frank implausibility of the glueman plot), it is perhaps also an indication of some embarrassment felt by the film's appeal to what are essentially

Utopian and archly-Romantic absolutes (exceeding even the idealism of Jennings work, where the “spiritual” dimension is nevertheless rooted in the material, empirical certainties of cinematic realism). It is an idealistic aesthetic more akin to the promise of the American Dream than it is to conservative English culture.

In fact, *A Canterbury Tale* can be seen to operate as an anglicisation of that parable of Americana, *The Wizard of Oz*. Just as Clive Candy becomes ‘the Wiz’ in *Colonel Blimp*, so the Canterbury pilgrims become the dream-exiles from Kansas, with the unidentified Glue-Man taking the place of the Wicked Witch (in a scene missing from the released film but present in the unpublished shooting script, early rumours of the glue-man’s capture cause soldiers in their barracks to burst into a song reminiscent of the Munchkins’ “Ding dong the witch is dead”). Canterbury has all the mystical promise of the Emerald City, and of course, the blessings conferred upon Dorothy and her companions compare with those seemingly granted by Colpeper (Dorothy’s wish, of course, is to find a way home, and ‘home’ is a highly charged idea in Powell and Pressburger’s work). The magistrate is therefore an amalgam of both the good and bad witch, and the Wizard himself. *The Wizard of Oz* informs other Powell and Pressburger films. This may derive from the structural similarities with Shakespearean pastoral comedy: as has already been mentioned, plays such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *As You Like It* serve as a rough model for many Archers productions, while in Fleming’s picaresque fantasy the Land of Oz shares the dream-like and magic potential of Shakespeare’s enchanted forests. Elsewhere, Vicky’s red shoes in some senses repeat the function of Dorothy’s ruby slippers. Lermontov, of course, is called a ‘magician’, and his isolation, his chaste, yet quasi-romantic relationship with a manipulated heroine, and his intense religiosity cast him as a descendent of Colpeper. The first shot of Colpeper in the court-room establishes his own authority and sets his distance from the community; while

the last shot of him alone in the entrance to Canterbury Cathedral as Alison walks past in the crowd with her fiancé's father anticipates the last shot of Lermontov, alone in his box. That Colpeper ultimately walks with the flow of the crowd into Canterbury Cathedral indicates this film's greater commitment to the all-embracing aesthetic of inclusivity which characterised a dominant strand of wartime British cinema.

The concluding images of *A Canterbury Tale* formally return the film to the medieval ambience of its prologue. To the celebratory peal of cathedral bells and the return of the 'mystical' (and heavenly) choral refrain, a series of increasingly distant long-shots of the cathedral returns the spectator to the bend in the Old Road. Church bells, of course, had once been silenced, to be used only in the event of invasion or to signify the end of war. They had rung out in 1942 after El Alemain, and by 1944 were regularly heard again (*A Canterbury Tale* also shows the village church bells being rung as usual). Nevertheless, the peal can be taken to have retained a particularly loaded significance during the war. Thus the series of dissolves from the cathedral service, up through the cathedral itself to its ringing bells, and then to the long-shot from the Pilgrims Road, marks a departure from the specific, 'realistic' time-frame of the narrative. It precisely recalls the opening shots of the film, temporally unrooted and dream-like. A similarly 'unplaced' scene is to be found in *A Matter of Life and Death*, where Peter Carter (David Niven) is washed ashore on an uncannily dehistoricised beach. Here the doubt about the nature of the beach symbolises the existential uncertainty which surrounds Peter. At the same time, Peter might be emerging in a metaphysical state, in classical antiquity or within a realistic timeframe, and it is not until an aeroplane drones overhead that the doubt is resolved. Just as Humphrey Jennings' spectator/listener becomes the organising site of *Listen to Britain*, making his/her own synthesised meaning from the Jennings' audio-visual montage, so Powell positions his own viewer to realise the motivating strategy of his film:

the image of pilgrimage becomes a metaphor for optimism, commitment and common purpose, and yet retains its divine dimension. Like the last lingering shot of Massine demonically tempting us to dance in *The Red Shoes*, the spell of enchantment, which this climactic shot of the celestial city aims to cast, is a blatant exploitation of the audience's appetite for fulfilled fantasy. It is the viewing subject's desire which finally pushes *A Canterbury Tale* into its Utopian regime. Over the closing credits, we see men and women going together to Colpeper's lectures, while in the last shot, village children are seen playing football. This return to the quotidian takes that idealistic Canterbury spirit and implicitly imbues the everyday activities of the contemporary village with it. The film's mysticism and medievalism are made immediately relevant, and the final image of childhood (since Blake and Wordsworth, romantically associated with the unspoilt or blessed state we might aspire to) shows a text committed to the future as much as it is fond of the past.

Like *Blimp*, in the last analysis the political orthodoxy of *A Canterbury Tale* is impeccable. Despite its idiosyncrasies, Powell and Pressburger's idealism ultimately runs with the prevailing cultural current. Both films depict a culture which is able to embrace change. That the past is not a prisonhouse is signalled in the metamorphoses which both the seemingly inflexible Candy and Colpeper undergo. But a critical distinction is to be made with *Blimp*. This earlier film had set out to critique 'How we Fight' and can be shown to endorse the determinism of modern warfare, however much it seems to regret it. Thus, Candy's blinkered world-view, a prime instance of an Old Tory's strenuous disavowal of reality, is put aside, even if Spud's humiliating exposure of Candy has sadistic overtones. The status quo, inasmuch as Candy represents it, is undeniably challenged. In contrast, *A Canterbury Tale* deals with 'Why we Fight'. As such its natural domain is the realm of the emotions, of deeply internalised structures of feeling

which together construct an imaginary version of virtuous Englishness which might motivate the people to take arms in her defence. On balance, therefore (and despite its closer affiliation to the documentary movement), *A Canterbury Tale* is the more reactionary work. It demands continuity. Any modern values it can embrace, and the visionary future it anticipates, are founded in a traditional, uninterrupted ruralism which is unhurried, impractical and inefficient. It therefore favours those very faults for which 'Blimp' is spiritually dismissed. Taken together, the two films suggest that although we decry Candy's methods, we fight to preserve his old world charm.

3.2.6: Conclusion

Throughout this Section, I have sought to illustrate the degree to which some of Powell and Pressburger's work participates in a project to fabricate a discretely and tightly defined 'British cinema' by conforming with the fundamental values of Second World War British culture. Any such concept of 'National Cinema' as a critical construct remains problematical, suggesting an attempt to stabilise and to institutionalise a complex, shifting dynamic of economic, ideological and aesthetic parameters. Nevertheless, placing Powell and Pressburger *within* that paradigm throws their stance towards 'nation', and Englishness in particular, into relief. While they have no truck with xenophobia, they are clearly committed to nationhood, yet there is still a resistance to the dominant constructions by which Britishness was known. Hence, in the degree to which *A Canterbury Tale* stands up as travelogue, it exhibits an almost (documentary-like) anthropological interest in racial groups - here it is the English who are to be investigated and categorised. The film incorporates a tension between a simple fetishistic fascination

and a more distanced, analytical position. England is both Self and Other, and is given a sympathetic quizzing.

A kinship with foreigners - Theo in *Blimp* and Bob Johnson in *A Canterbury Tale* - suggests a trans-nationalism, or at least some indifference to borders. Broadly accepted 'human virtues' (such as honesty) are held up as admirable, regardless of where they are found, while empathy with the lived experience of the foreigner erases any sense of nationally constructed otherness. Clive's link to Theo and Horton's to Bob transcend boundaries of nation and are ultimately reducible to class: they are knitted together more thoroughly by virtue of their shared value systems and lifestyle than they are separated by geographical accidents of birth. Perhaps this does suggest a genuinely international aesthetic. The demonic aspect to Colpeper's personality seems to warn against too fastidious a sense of Englishness, connoting 'patriotism' (in its more neurotic guise) with something more deeply perverse. Closed systems and small minds are brought into question. Horton's provincialism, his patronising sexism, and Colpeper's blatant misogyny are clearly critiqued. However, the international bonds forged in these films do not signify that notions of national roots are to be jettisoned. Theo is metaphorically orphaned from his fatherland and seeks a surrogate in England, and although the warm reception he receives from Candy's household in London clearly challenges more absolutist or racially pure senses of nationhood, the narrative clearly regrets that the political situation in Germany has denied Theo a genuine national identity of his own (something which the dignified pathos of Walbrook's performance also conveys). The one unredeemed character in these films remains Kaunitz, the German double-agent, equally despised by the British and the Boers. This is because he violates any sense of certainty: not only does he defy Clive's code of honour, but he lacks affiliation to any service other than his own. He travesties any sense of belonging, and masquerades national identity. In Chapter 4.2,

the significance of spying is given a fuller treatment: in Powell and Pressburger's films with Conrad Veidt it is seen as an inherently unstable situation, and is a cause of anxiety.

For half a decade, many popular narratives had been assimilated into a hegemonic and apparently stable national profile. As Sarah Street has noted, a mythic sense of wartime consensus presented Britain as "a diverse but united community of interests".⁶¹ As such, *difference* (of class, of gender...) could be entertained and contained, but would be downplayed, while marks of *dissidence* would be tend to be erased. In its stylistic pastiches and waltzing temporality, *Blimp* might seem positively post-modern, dazzlingly heterogeneous, were it not for the fact that its fragmented appearance is held together by Candy's biographical journey - a site of dubious coherence, but a stodgily Romantic grand narrative nevertheless, and figured around Candy are notions of 'Home' and of communal unity. The need to put down roots is the site of idealistic longing in these works, and it is in this respect that they fit into a model of British cinema drawn along lines which celebrate the nation. Resistance is marked, critiques are offered, but a strong investment in the epic of nation is still made. Broadly speaking, patriotic values become the repository for Powell and Pressburger's customary Romantic idealism.



⁶¹ Sarah Street. *British National Cinema* (Routledge: London, 1997). p. 50.

4: HYBRID CINEMA

Introduction

Having attended in the previous Section to the ways in which Powell and Pressburger participate in the construction of that classical paradigm, the “British National Cinema”, in the Section which follows, the attention shifts more thoroughly towards other (often Continental) influences - influences which are more regularly committed to the animation of the ‘Other’. The notion of a ‘European’ film undoes any neatly defined national cinema, and in numerous ways Powell and Pressburger’s work (rightly noted to contain foreign elements at the time) genuinely straddles the English Channel (while in its sense of spectacle it clearly also looks across the Atlantic). Often, and especially in films which buffer the war years, an important sense of hybridity is explored. It can be seen in their narratives, with storylines which either literally explore foreignness or which embody gothic motifs and structures taken in particular from German cinema. It is not just at a narrative level that they worry away at their constructions of nationhood. It is also seen at a stylistic level. An illusionary sense of realism would come to constitute the film language of what was thought of critically as the ‘Classic British Text’. Disruptions to this stable and restrained style would be perceived to be the clear markers of alternative discourses. It is worthwhile looking then at what form of cinema predated the establishment of the ‘classical’ British text, to see what prevailing trends in the British film industry had to be muted and masked to allow the classical model to achieve its dominant status.

This section looks first at the Germanic traces in British Cinema to provide a necessary background to what follows. In particular the outline of the British cinema industry in the 1930s, relatively open as it was to international influence and collaboration, informs the succeeding treatment of Powell and Pressburger's first films together. *The Spy in Black* and *Contraband* offer pronounced treatments of the 'alien'. Despite the obvious debt to Hitchcock, these early fruits of the partnership are readable as gothic exercises, constructing a rather paranoid view of nation within which the figure of the enemy spy is made monstrous and the idea of 'alien territory' is given fuller treatment. The 1939-40 spy films map subjective anxiety onto geographical displacement and work through themes of nation, duty and identity, giving them a contemporary gloss by alluding to real fears of invasion. As a companion to the analysis of these films an assessment of the importance of Anton Walbrook in British cinema is offered: Walbrook followed Veidt into British cinema. In many ways he followed in his shadow (Walbrook, for example, starred in a remake of Veidt's *Student of Prague*). Walbrook also starred in a remake of Ivor Novello's *The Rat*. This suggests a versatility and an international appeal: Walbrook's various personae can be read as descendants of the German stage on which he trained, and they also articulate something about the British representation of masculinity. Importantly, therefore, he straddles national identities.

This sense of internationalism is something which obviously critiques the critical construction of discrete national cinemas, for undeniably, Powell and Pressburger's work remains "British" even though it violates the parameters of a more rigidly defined national culture. The forms of fluid identity paraded in the Veidt roles in particular (where the fluidity is a source of expressionistic anxiety) will emerge again in the post-war work looked at in Section 5. In that Section the post-war Technicolor melodramas which Powell and Pressburger produced are examined for similar signs of foreign invasion. First

it is necessary to trace where that aesthetic came from, and that it what this brief Section sets out to do.



4.1: 'German' Traces and 'British' Cinema: a Brief History

In the ambiguous world of the German cinema, people are unsure of their identity and can easily lose it by the way." Lotte Eisner

4.1.1: Germanic Traces in Pre-War British Film Culture

Before assessing how far Powell and Pressburger's work is permeated by a Germanic aesthetic, we should consider the wider context of British film culture into which the team arrived in the 1930s, and also look back to the German cinema to which they have sometimes been linked. A number of assumptions need to be examined here: the lazy equation which is often made between the cinema of the Weimar Republic and Expressionism; the use of the word 'expressionist' to describe moments of cinematic 'excess'; the degree to which such 'Continental' habits permeated (or failed to permeate) British film culture; and the vexed question of how far the presence of such foreign traits problematises the very construction of the phrase 'British Cinema'. Seeking origins and explanations for German styles and themes imprinted in British cinema, this chapter has something of an archaeological dimension.

A characteristic of Powell and Pressburger's films is their use of visual artifice, often coded as excessive moments bursting out of an otherwise realistic milieu to rupture the text's apparent classicism. There is that gigantic whisky bottle overpowering David Farrar in *The Small Back Room*, or the hallucinatory ballet sequence in *The Red Shoes*. Elsewhere, as in the design of *Black Narcissus* or in the overtly fantastic *Tales of Hoffmann*, the entire structure of the film is marked by artifice. Such pieces might be termed expressionist. Distorted camera angles, shadows, process shots, stylised sets,

super-impositions and montage effects: these, and many other deviations from 'photographic realism', are often taken to constitute the grammar of an expressionist film language. But Expressionism arose as a specifically avant-garde aesthetic: it is no mere battery of decorative cinematic symptoms, but is a radical art of protest. Deployed slackly as descriptive short-hand, the term is blunted by overuse, nullifying its worth as a critical tool altogether.

Diverse strains feed into British pre-war cinema culture: jostling with indigenous popular entertainment forms and the spectacles and narratives of the Victorian melodramatic theatre are both neo-Romantic and expressionistic elements which derive from German stage and cinema. The debate over how far British cinema incorporated ideas from Continental Europe, and how best to account for stark anti-realism in British films, is in part an argument about how open British culture was to the intellectual changes marked by European modernism. If for no other reason, the Archers recruitment of German émigrés suggests their own affinity with this foreign culture (most obviously, they team up with the designers Alfred Junge and Hein Heckroth, actors Conrad Veidt, Anton Walbrook and Albert Bassermann, and cinematographer Erwin Hillier).

Sarah Street judges the period from the 1920s to the 1930s to mark the first phase of a period of Modernism within British cinema.¹ She correctly regards the key cleavage in world cinema to have been that between Hollywood (marked early on by what would come to be termed its classical style and linked associate with an overtly commercial cinema) and alternatives to it. Indeed, Russian montage, German expressionist styles, French impressionism and surrealism all present themselves as intellectual, 'artistic'

¹ Sarah Street, *British National Cinema* (Routledge: London, 1997).

alternatives to the American form, and as such they perpetuate a distinction between so-called 'high art' and 'mass entertainment' (inevitably and elitely favouring the former).

Echoing Tom Ryall's argument², Street notes the significance of London's Film Society in developing ideas about film (as artistic practice, as cultural protest, although at this stage notably less as an agent of tightly defined 'national' expression). Founded by Ivor Montagu and Hugh Miller, the Film Society existed from 1925 to 1939. An organisation for film enthusiasts which, in addition to showing new imports and old favourites, arranged screenings of experimental European work often not exhibited anywhere else, The Film Society provided a platform in London for the intellectual consideration of an art-house cinema, although it should be stressed that what its programme provided was an alternative cinema to a minority elite (the respectability of the Society can be gauged from a glance at its more eminent members: Wells and Shaw, Roger Fry and John Maynard Keynes, Ellen Terry, John Gielgud and Ivor Novello, together with names from the cinema such as Michael Bacon and Victor Saville). It was nevertheless the catalyst for the development of a specialised, modernist film coterie within the capital, and its importance has often been overlooked by studies which concentrate on the admittedly paltry state of feature film production in Britain in the 1920s. Bolstered by the publication of the periodicals *Close-Up* (which appeared from July 1927 until 1933) and *Film Art* (1933-37), the presence of the Film Society suggests an openness during this period to continental influences. The critical voice emanating from the Film Society, and echoed in these journals, gave forthright damnation to the Hollywood product, and promoted the European 'art' film. As Street notes, the editorial

² Tom Ryall, *Alfred Hitchcock and the British Cinema* (Athlone Press Ltd: London, 1996). Ryall offers a detailed profile of British film culture in the inter-war period. I am indebted to his survey of the place of the Film Society as evidence of intellectual cineaste activity at a time when British film production was otherwise relatively under-developed.

policy of *Close-Up* was “consistent with European modernism’s general internationalism and cosmopolitanism.”³ What is more, it is clear from the terms of the discourse instituted by *Close-Up* that the notion of cinematic oppositionalism as a valid artistic stance was firmly established by the 1930s.

Andrew Higson’s recent writings on the so-called ‘Film Europe’ project have redirected attention towards another mode of film making during the ’thirties which similarly breached discretely constructed versions of ‘national’ cinema.⁴ This time a commercially motivated attempt to ward off Hollywood’s hegemony, Film Europe established procedures of international co-operation during the silent era, pooling resources such as studio space and personnel, and setting up pan-national distribution to fend off US domination of the market. The coming of talkies did not utterly parochialise European cinema. Strategies such as multilinguals (whereby different language versions of the same film would be filmed either back-to-back or simultaneously) sought to transcend national boundaries. This policy “spoke the local vernacular”, as Higson notes, “but was bound by a stateless blueprint.”⁵ Thus we find ‘German’ films such as Reinhold Schünzel’s *Viktor und Viktoria* (1933) made multi-lingually - it was also produced in French as *Georges et Georgette* - before it is recast, re-written and re-made (in an adapted form) in the U.K. by Victor Saville as *First a Girl* (1935). Similarly *Michel Strogoff* (dir. Jacques de Baroncelli and Richard Eichberg, 1935) is made in both German and French versions before it is subsequently re-made by R.K.O. in America as *The Soldier and the Lady* (dir. George Nicholls Jr., 1937). These works, with the exception of *First a Girl*,

³ Street, p. 152.

⁴ Andrew Higson, ‘A Film League of Nations’: Gainsborough, Gaumont-British and ‘Film Europe’, in Pam Cook (ed.), *Gainsborough Pictures* (Cassell: London: 1997).

⁵ Higson, p. 75.

all starred Anton Walbrook, one of a group of actors who can be seen to be genuinely international.

What is important about these films (and the Film Society's elitist critical voice) is that they point to a lively hybridity in European cinema, whether it is configured aesthetically, intellectually, or commercially. By the mid 'thirties, with the emigration of film technicians to Britain from Germany and central Europe, Film Europe itself either dissipated, or, in Higson's view, became absorbed into British cinema. While the policy's initial reason for being - namely as a marketing strategy - ceased to be important, nevertheless, "if we understand it in terms of the interdependence of cultures, or of national cinematic traditions - if, in other words, we understand it as a form of international cinema - then 'Film-Europe' took on a new form and found a new home in the British film industry."⁶ This powerfully argues the case that British cinema (or at least cinema *in Britain*) in the 'thirties had a cosmopolitan character. Certainly German technicians were important, and certainly the presence of Alexander Korda and the émigrés around him suggests a strong international dimension. But a glance at the nature of production in the 'thirties suggests that the home industry cannot properly be said to be shaped *exclusively* by 'British' cultural determinants in any meaningful way (the most 'indigenous cinema' being the admittedly considerable exception of the star-vehicles built around popular musical hall singers and comedians such as Gracie Fields, George Formby, Will Hay). Notably, Korda's international 'prestige' pictures aimed to win an American audience; and while Quota quickies existed in theory to stave off Hollywood's monopolisation of U.K. cinema screens, they were in practice made to justify a strong American presence in the country. Thus, while Tom Ryall finds that, quantitatively, the

⁶ Higson, p. 75.

majority of films made in Britain in the 'thirties (including those made to comply with Quota legislation) were crime films, comedies or musicals - all derived from popular culture - he nevertheless argues that this prevents that cinema from being seen as genuinely 'national': "The failure of British cinema of the thirties to achieve an authentically national status and identity" he argues, "can be linked to the presence of so many foreigners working in a cinema which either addressed itself to an international audience or was concerned with turning films out on a low budget assembly line to meet the quota requirements of the big American companies."⁷ Clearly, these production policies undo any simple assessment of what a 'national cinema' might be, although in Ryall's diagnosis of 'thirties cinema as having *failed* there are hints of an unfortunately prescriptive set of assumptions (it should be said that Ryall's exploration of the national cinema, worked through his treatment of British 'Hitchcock', is a sophisticated and considered one). But it is equally problematical to deny that those quota quickies are not 'British'; and even more contentious to suggest that Korda's epics - whether monarchical or imperial in theme - do not speak to and form part of a British national culture, however much alien factors are incorporated into them.

Emigration to Britain for whatever reason (not all of the arrivals were political refugees) was clearly important, as notions of pan-Europeanism began to recede and ideas of a 'British national cinema' started to be constructed. If (in Chapter 2) the concept of the 'alien' was considered in connection with how Emeric Pressburger's own rather anomalous position is written into his texts (as was suggested there, he is perhaps the pre-eminent immigrant screenwriter in British cinema), it is also important to look at the impact of those technicians, particularly designers and cinematographers, working in the

⁷ Ryall, p. 66.

industry here during the 'thirties and 'forties. In Britain, the contribution of the designer to the film production was readily recognised by writers such as Paul Rotha. His early writings, in particular his influential *The Film Till Now* of 1930, form part of a growing cinematic literature in Britain which (just like the Film Society) valued European art cinema and which condemned the escapist illusionism of Hollywood. In his essays "Technique of the Art-Director" (1928), and "The Art-Director and the Film Script" (1930), Rotha acknowledges Germany's pre-eminence in the field of art design, particularly in films which called for settings of a fantastic nature such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1919) and Paul Leni's *Waxworks* (1924), obviously the themes of such films demand an artificial setting.⁸ The international reputation of German cinema in the 1920s was to a large extent based upon the technical superiority of its art direction and cinematography (not on its specifically expressionistic character, although it was in expressionistic films that the technician's special area of expertise was given its most visible platform). As Rotha concedes, "Every film cannot be a *Caligari* ... (b)ut there is no reason why just as much design and competition cannot be used in a kitchen set for a slapstick comedy as in an expressionistic setting".⁹ The sole art director working in England whom Rotha finds space to praise is Alfred Junge, at the time working for British International Pictures at Elstree on *Moulin Rouge* (1928) with director E. A. Dupont, although soon to move to Michael Bacon's Gaumont British studios at Lime Grove and Shepherds Bush, where he would later commence his long collaboration with Michael Powell with *The Fire Raisers* (1933) and *Red Ensign* (1934).

⁸ These essays are reprinted in Paul Rotha, *Rotha on the Film* (Faber & Faber: London, 1958).

⁹ Rotha, p. 43.

Junge had made his reputation in Germany (working, for instance as art director on *Waxworks*). The other designer chiefly associated with Powell and Pressburger, the German Hein Heckroth, similarly boasts notable modernist credentials. A painter and set designer (influenced by Picasso), he came to Britain in 1934 with the Kurt Joos ballet company, an experimental dance troupe which located itself in Devon at the alternative art college, Dartington Hall. Tim Bergfelder has given critical attention to the influx of German design concepts into the British cinema industry, arguing that it cannot be fully explained in terms of a migration of key personnel from Nazi Germany (although clearly, this displacement intensified the trend).¹⁰ Along with Alfred Junge, who had in fact been resident in Britain as early as the 1920s, the designers Oscar Werndorff and Vincent Korda (at Gainsborough's Islington studio and at Korda's Denham establishment respectively), together with the cinematographers Gunther Krampf, Otto Kanturek and Mutz Greenbaum, were among those given contracts here (and unlike the majority of the workforce, resident designers such as Junge were often retained on long-term contracts, allowing highly organised art departments to be developed).¹¹ One of Powell and Pressburger's chief collaborators, the cameraman Erwin Hillier, had likewise been trained in the German film industry, his first job having been as camera assistant on Fritz Lang's *M* (1931). What they were able to bring to British production was the notion that the

¹⁰ Tim Bergfelder, 'The Production Designer and the *Gesamtkunstwerk*: German Film Technicians in the British Film Industry', in Andrew Higson (ed.), *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema* (Cassell: London, 1996).

¹¹ The Austrian Oskar Werndorff had worked at UFA before moving to Britain where he was Art Director on such films as Victor Saville's *First a Girl* (1935) and on Hitchcock's *The Thirty Nine Steps* (1935), *Sabotage* (1936) and *The Secret Agent* (1936). His fellow Austrian Gunther Krampf had photographed Pabst's *Pandora's Box* (1928) before his move to Britain. Otto Kanturek and Mutz Greenbaum (under his anglicised name Max Greene) photographed a wide range of films in Britain from the thirties onwards.

expressive potential of film could be organised around a conceptually structured approach to design as a unifying agent.

The controlled visual style associated with German cinema is explicable in terms of the organisation of labour within the German studio system. Kristin Thompson has noted that many German directors had a higher degree of control over their work than their contemporaries in America, retaining the freedom to select projects, to be involved in script-writing, in casting and design.¹² Her conclusion is that the scope for experimentation in the early Continental studio was greater than in Hollywood, which was characterised by streamlined production, standardisation, and the division of labour. In Germany, she argues, “the set designer was an unusually prominent production role.”¹³ What was therefore distinctive about these films is that their overall look was pre-designed primarily by the director in collaboration with the art director, and that this became the accepted method for producing quality work. Lotte Eisner has given an account of this pre-shooting period:

One of the secrets of the success of the classical German film was the perfect technical harmony achieved by long *Regiesitzungen*, discussions on the *mise-en-scène* of the film to be made which sometimes lasted for two months or more before the actual filming began, and to which the director invited everybody due to work on the film, from the chief designer and chief cameraman to the workmen in charge of the lighting.

A British designer expressed his astonishment when the German cameraman Gunther Krampf, before starting filming in a studio near London, asked about his sketches

¹² Kristin Thompson, ‘Early Alternatives to the Hollywood Mode of Production’, *Film History (USA)*, Vol.5 no. 4, December 1993.

¹³ Thompson, p. 402.

(‘an unusual way of going about things in our country’) in order to study them carefully to gauge the shooting angles and to be able to supervise the lighting.¹⁴

The emphasis on design in this country may thus be traced back to German “rationalizations of technology and labour as well as the meticulous planning” of the Weimar film industry.¹⁵ Assessing the impact of German designers on the output from Gainsborough in the 1920s and 1930s, Bergfelder has recently reiterated that “the main objective of these German or German-influenced art directors was ... to convey both atmosphere and meaning through an overriding design concept, encompassing every visual aspect.”¹⁶

Given the understandable assumption that artistic endeavour such as this, deriving however vaguely and in whatever muted form from a German studio aesthetic, stood in opposition to the tenets of realism, it is perhaps surprising to note a comment made from Hollywood, in 1932, regarding the effects of this influx of personnel into British studios. In the judgement of art director Paul Holmes, “A valuable advance in realism (had) been attained through the closer co-operation of the director and cameraman with the art director ... The German studios have always realised that large sums of money can be saved if the director, camera staff, and art director work in closest harmony.”¹⁷ Putting Holmes’s crucial economic consideration to one side, it is important to notice that no conflict is discernible at this time between the controlled ‘artifice’ of consistent studio

¹⁴ Eisner’s key text, *The Haunted Screen*, was first published in France in 1952. See Lotte H. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt* (Secker & Walburg Ltd: London, 1973), p. 36.

¹⁵ Bergfelder (1996), p. 36.

¹⁶ Tim Bergfelder, ‘Surface and Distraction: Style and Genre at Gainsborough in the Late 1920s and 1930s’, in Cook (ed.), p. 33.

¹⁷ Paul Holmes, *Kinematograph Weekly*, 11/2/32, p. 33.

design (something which would come to be associated by critics of the 1940s with dubious Continentalism), and the ‘authenticity’ of realistic cinema. In short, no recognisable national style built upon a realist ethic had yet been constructed, and British cinema, regardless of questions of quality, enjoyed a healthy heterogeneity.¹⁸

Clearly, by the outbreak of war the terms of the debate within critical discourse had been reconfigured along what are to us more familiar lines. The cinematic establishment embraced realism (taking its cue from the British documentary movement) and the germanic aesthetic was critically marginalised. As Tom Ryall has pointed out (taking his cue from Alan Lovell), modernist impulses tended to find space under Grierson: “the interest in cinema as an art form which was fostered by the film societies and by film journals was, in fact, captured by the documentary movement ... ‘Art’ was deflected away from the commercial cinema.”¹⁹ While in the main Ryall’s argument is persuasive, it is important to note that a minority resisted the pull of documentary: Powell and Pressburger would continue to operate in the commercial sphere, yet consistently sought to stretch the medium and to experiment with its form *within* a non-realist cinema.

Twin cultural trends are to be deduced from the establishment of realism as a dominant form in this country. First: the development of a perceived connection between the documentary form and Britishness. Given that the social purpose and the montage techniques evident in the documentary style betray the influence of Soviet cinema, this seems at first paradoxical.²⁰ However, both Soviet cinema and the British documentary

¹⁸ The importance of economic factors cannot be downplayed: Lotte Eisner even suggests that the studio flats which mark out *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* as a truly Expressionist film were part of producer Eric Pommer’s policy to keep costs down! See Eisner, p. 19.

¹⁹ Ryall, p. 21. See also Alan Lovell & Jim Hillier, *Studies in Documentary* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1972).

²⁰ Jen Samson makes the point convincingly that one of the key cross-fertilisations to have arisen out of the Film Society was that between Soviet cinema and the Documentary Movement. Grierson, Wright, Cole and Cavalcanti were all members of the Society. Eisenstein himself gave a series of lectures on

movement had a social impetus, and if by realism we mean an aesthetic practice which strives to subordinate the signifier (the film image) to the signified (the filmed object), there is a clear argument for stating that the pictorial content of such documentaries inevitably binds them within a British national discourse, regardless of whether they are stylistically influenced by foreign practices of montage. In works such as Robert Flaherty's *Industrial Britain* (1933), Harry Watt and Basil Wright's *Night Mail* (1936) and Humphrey Jennings' *Heart of Britain* (1941) and *Listen to Britain*, capturing the native 'scene' is paramount. The second discernible trend is the onset of a resistance to immigrant workers within the industry. Kevin Gough-Yates has noted that while Britain was initially an "open market for the Europeans," there was considerable suspicion that this infiltration was detrimental to the careers of British technicians and to the establishment of a distinctly British industry.²¹ John Grierson, writing anonymously in *World Film News* (3/9/36), explicitly titled his article "Aliens Stifle British Talent"²² (this point is also made by Tim Bergfelder: he notes that organisational pressure and lobbying within the industry from the Association of Cine-Technicians brought about a closed shop which ended the cosmopolitanism of British cinema).²³

This said, the sort of cinema advocated by Grierson and embraced by Bacon at Ealing failed to monopolise the film industry entirely, and the mixed aesthetic of the 1920s and 1930s did continue. As it was with Powell and Pressburger, cultural cross-breeding

montage to the Society in 1929, and in November of that year, Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* received its U.K. premier, as did John Grierson's own documentary, *Drifters*. See Jan Samson, 'The Film Society, 1925-1939', in Charles Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema* (B.F.I.: London, 1986).

²¹ Kevin Gough-Yates 'The British Feature Film as a European Concern: Britain and the Émigré Film-Maker, 1933-45', in Günter Berghaus (ed.), *Theatre and Film in Exile: German Artists in Britain, 1933-1945* (Berg Publishers: Oxford, 1989), p. 161.

²² quoted in Gough-Yates, p. 150.

²³ Bergfelder (1996), p. 33.

is also a feature of the Gainsborough melodrama series of the 1940s, where the stable pedigree yearned for by 'British national cinema' is directly violated. No longer manifested purely at a technological/industrial level, hybridity actually constituted part of the ideological weight of Gainsborough's output. Pam Cook has noted that in these films (such as *The Man in Grey* (dir. Leslie Arliss, 1943) and *Madonna of the Seven Moons* (dir. Arthur Crabtree, 1944)) "identity itself is fluid and unstable, like the costume genre itself, a hybrid state or form. And ... national identity is not pure, but mixed."²⁴ The lineage of this cinema is traceable back to the free European labour market of previous decades, to the institutional set up of Film Europe and in its own way to the early intellectual viewpoint articulated by the Film Society (however much the cultural elitism of that organisation frowned upon such popular entertainments and however much it had, by the 'forties, thrown its weight behind the high moral purpose of the documentary movement and its derivatives). The fluidity, instability and hybridity which Cook finds at Gainsborough also characterises works such as Powell and Pressburger's *The Spy in Black* (see Chapter 4.2).

In an interview with Sue Harper, Maurice Carter (the Art Director at Gainsborough from 1938) recalled the input of designers at his studio:

John Bryan was one of the greatest, he influenced me enormously, his strength of design. He had come from the Korda set-up, and was very much influenced by that Hungarian one, Bellan²⁵ was it, who came over with them ... I took a lot from him. (Design) developed from the German and not the American tradition ..., it came up from UFA, and Craig and Appia.²⁶ We were all very

²⁴ Pam Cook. 'Neither Here nor There: National Identity in Gainsborough Costume Drama', in Higson (ed.), p. 61.

²⁵ The Austrian, Ferdinand Bellan, worked, for example, on Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949).

²⁶ Edward Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia, hugely influential writers and practitioners of stage design. See Section 4.1.3. of this thesis.

much influenced by films such as *Dr Mabuse*. They were design dominated.²⁷

The stage designs and theories of drama put forward by Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig had been very influential on German cinema, and these names now offer a lineage back from British anti-realist cinema to the theatre of Richard Wagner.

4.1.2: Cultural Antecedents: Nineteenth Century Germany

At this stage it is necessary to look to Germany. While the key practitioners within German cinema were very much part of Weimar culture, the traditions from which they arose stretch back to the nineteenth century. In order to make sense of German film and its impact, some consideration of this background is called for. In particular, it is impossible to ignore the figure of Richard Wagner. It is his legacy which dominates artistic activity in Germany through till the early 20th century.²⁸ Theories of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and of the dialectics of music-drama, fed into Expressionist drama, while the religiosity of *Parsifal*, for instance, appealed to its soul-searching romantic idealism.²⁹

The refrain which Powell chose from Kipling's *Rewards and Fairies* ("All art is one, man, one!") sends Wagnerian tones echoing throughout his autobiography. The *Gesamtkunstwerk* tradition informs his and Pressburger's post-war Technicolor output, while their collaborative working practice parallels Wagner's ideal of common artistic

²⁷ Sue Harper, 'Interview with Maurice Carter', in Sue Aspinall and Robert Murphy (eds), *Gainsborough Melodrama: B.F.I. Dossier 18* (B.F.I.: London, 1983), p. 58.

²⁸ See Peter Vergo, 'The Origins of Expressionism and the Notion of the Gesamtkunstwerk', in Shulamith Behr et al (eds), *Expressionism Reassessed* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1993).

²⁹ See Raymond Furness, 'The Religious Elements in Expressionist Cinema', in Behr et al. (eds).

endeavour. The hunt for stylistic cohesion, for a synthesis of the senses which would create an organic whole, was what drove Powell to the visceral intensification of *Black Narcissus*, *The Red Shoes* and *Tales of Hoffmann* (this is given fuller treatment in Chapter 5.1). Clearly, the precedent for this is Wagner, and the concept of the total work of art. However, Peter Vergo, in his exploration of the influence which this notion had upon the Expressionist artists, observes that the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* is in fact given little treatment in Wagner's writings. Instead Wagner refers to constructions such as 'Gesamtvolkskunst' ('the work of art of an entire people') or 'das gemeinsame Kunstwerk' (translated as 'communal art' or 'common artistic endeavour'). By this Wagner means what Vergo describes as "a new kind of art which will express the identity, the character, the cultural and the mythic aspirations of an entire people, while uniting them in a common ritualistic and - in Wagner's eyes at least - religious experience."³⁰ The notion of ritual as a shared, symbolically significant act knits the essentially remote and detached view of Romantic art into a social fabric. As an ideal, it might have been forged from a happy synthesis of Powell and Pressburger's highly co-ordinated fusions of drama, sound and colour with the monological social vision which classic British cinema of the war period strove for. Yet, while the ideological incorporation of the individual into the public sphere is indeed reflected in the dynamics of Powell and Pressburger's wartime films (and the Wagnerian terms just mentioned do call to mind the public ideals of British wartime cinema in general), the dissidence, perversity or moments of social fragmentation within these texts undoes any genuine sense of communal, cohesive expression. Perhaps (and this is something which needs to be illustrated by fuller treatment than can be offered here) Olivier's *Henry V*, which combines a full cinematic battery of expressive technique

³⁰ Vergo. p. 13.

with a solidly communal English rhetoric, serves as the most solid and explicit instance of the Wagnerian model of art in British (wartime) cinema.

Wagner's theories formed part of a German Romantic culture which he sought to rejuvenate. It was just such a tradition of Neo-Romanticism in German culture which Expressionism, motivated by urgent social polemic, sought to cast off. Paradoxically, Expressionism would be damned by its own critics for appearing to advocate a decadent, solipsistic obsessiveness of its own. Yet Expressionism, the rise of which is inseparable from the events of the First World War, declared itself to be a rejection of the detached, bourgeois aestheticism of nineteenth century Romantic art for art's sake. Richard Samuel and Richard Hinton Thomas identify exactly what it was about that Neo-Romanticism which the Expressionists discarded: "its cult of the past, its mystic adoration of nature, its worship of the aesthetic personality, its dissection of the soul, its aristocratic approach to art."³¹ Much of that repudiated Neo-Romantic ideology is, of course, the very stuff that would fuel the work of Powell and Pressburger: the nostalgia of *A Canterbury Tale* and *Blimp*; the mysticism of *I Know Where I'm Going!*; the sensuous symbolism of *Black Narcissus* and *Gone to Earth*; the Impressionistic fusion of the human and the natural in Powell's *Edge of the World*; the obsessive view of dance in *The Red Shoes* and of filmmaking in *Peeping Tom*. The case that Powell and Pressburger's work owes an allegiance to Expressionism is thus a weak one, albeit that on occasions they incorporate the distorted mannerisms of Expressionism for dramatic intensity. Rather, they are strongly situated within the nineteenth century ethos which Expressionism claimed to reject.

However, Expressionism's Modernist credentials might be seen to be compromised, for while it sought to address the social, and to criticise bourgeois culture,

³¹ Richard Samuel & Richard Hinton Thomas. *Expressionism in German Life, Literature and the Theatre (1910-1924)* (Albert Saifer: Philadelphia, 1971), p. 1.

it somewhat untidily clung to the older sense of mysticism. As Samuel and Hinton Thomas see it, “From the Neo-Romantic movement the Expressionists inherited the reaction against materialism, the metaphysical awareness and the search for God. Elements handed down from Naturalism can be traced in Expressionism which set itself the task, as opposed to Neo-Romanticism, of again boldly facing reality, even in its unpleasant aspects.”³² The protest against materialism and classicism, and the retained sense of the *metaphysical*, of spiritual aspiration: all these survived from the nineteenth century. These same idealistic motivations drive the Archers’ fantasy-romances (remember that both *A Canterbury Tale* and *I Know Where I’m Going!* are made to be ‘crusades against materialism’), and are the derivation of their much criticised deviations from realism.³³

The grandiloquence (for want of a better word) of both Neo-Romanticism and Expressionism can be seen as melodramatic. The term melodrama has tended to refer to either the popular Victorian theatre or to the Hollywood family melodrama of the 1940s and 1950s: very different cultural forms but each marked by social and psychic conflict focussing on the personal. Expressionism’s contorted accommodation of both social purpose and metaphysical aspiration is part of a melodramatic form. Melodrama operates by personalising conflict (its focus on individual agency marks it as a product of bourgeois ideology, and hence the importance it places on matters of personal identity), but, in a post-sacred world, human activity is invested with mythic significance. Closely following Peter Brooks’ account of the form in *The Melodramatic Imagination*³⁴, Christine Gledhill

³² Samuel & Hinton Thomas. p. 15.

³³ quoted in Kevin MacDonald. *Emeric Pressburger: The Life and Death of a Screenwriter* (Faber & Faber: London, 1994), p. 233.

³⁴ Peter Brooks. *The Melodramatic Imagination* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1976).

suggests that it is both bound to a form of realism but is mistrustful of it. Melodrama, she writes, “sets out to demonstrate within the transactions of everyday life the continuing operation of a Manichean battle between good and evil which infuses human actions with ethical consequences and therefore with significance.”³⁵ It therefore situates itself within the domestic and familiar territory of the quotidian and the personal, but struggles to accommodate within this sphere the mythical or the transcendent. The grand gestures and the externalised emotions which we associate with melodrama are recast and exaggerated in Expressionism, but as much of the Romantic German cinema of the Weimar Republic illustrates, this is a matter of degree. Powell and Pressburger’s post-war melodramas share this heady concoction of personal strife, mystic significance and grand gesture: the excess we find in such works marks the site of these contradictions writ large.

4.1.3: The German Stage

Considered the foremost theatrical practitioner of his time, Max Reinhardt is deeply implicated in both the transformation of the German stage, and in the important experiments on the German screen, to the extent that Lotte Eisner’s seminal treatise on German Cinema takes his influence to have been central.³⁶ It is incorrect to think about Reinhardt’s work as Expressionist. Iconoclastically, he worked in a variety of styles and can be thought of as standing midway between the photographic representationalism of Naturalism and the abstractions of the Expressionists. He is nevertheless a key influence on the movement, and can be shown to have drawn strength from the Romantic tradition

³⁵ Christine Gledhill, ‘Signs of Melodrama’, in Christine Gledhill (ed.) *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (Routledge: London, 1991), p. 209.

³⁶ Explicitly, of course, the title of Eisner’s work is *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, (Secker & Walburg Ltd.: London, 1973).

(the debt to Wagner is notable), and from the idealistic writings and theatrical designs of two men mentioned earlier in connection with their influence on the design ethos of Gainsborough studios in the 1930s and 1940s: Edward Gordon Craig, and Adolphe Appia. Despite mounting an eclectic range of theatrical productions, a consistent set of characteristics unified Reinhardt's work. Among these were an inventive use of modern stage machinery and highly dramatic lighting techniques (he is particularly associated with the use of stark chiaroscuro effects), a fluidity of staging and a ready recourse to symbolic gestures (including the formal patterning of his geometric handling of crowds - something which Fritz Lang would later emulate in *Metropolis* (1926). Reinhardt also encouraged a collaborative principle. W. E. Yates has noted that "Reinhardt's production style, established in Berlin and later in Salzburg, was based on the ensemble principle, the creation of a harmonious team of actors, working in stage settings which used theatrical décor, often combining realistic and fantastic effects."³⁷ If Reinhardt's use of advanced stage machinery increased the pace of his productions, this can be seen as a shift within German theatre towards what would come to constitute part of the spectacular aesthetics of cinema. This shift was instigated by Wagner at Bayreuth. There, his revolutionary architectural developments - such as the darkened auditorium and the sunken orchestra pit - existed to maximise theatrical illusionism. The space he created was designed for unimpeded seeing. It anticipated the cinema auditorium.

However, the state of theatrical production during Wagner's lifetime struggled to match his hopes for it. That challenge was taken up by the French-Swiss designer Adolphe Appia. Appia, inspired by Wagner's music, sought to fuse aural and visual elements, as set out in the principle of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but he was primarily

³⁷ W. E. Yates, *Theatre in Vienna: A Critical History, 1776-1995* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1996), p. 214.

governed according to musical principles. In his early writings, a pamphlet entitled *Staging Wagnerian Drama* (1891) and his most important work *Music and the Art of Theatre* (1895), Appia set out his ideas regarding non-representational mise-en-scène, together with the use of light and projection, all harmonising with music to establish a fluid dramatic space and atmosphere. It is the musicality of Appia's work which Richard C. Beecham chooses to emphasise: "Appia's conceptions of theatrical art required that the expressive elements be co-ordinated by a designer-director, according to an hierarchy dominated and controlled by music, in order to realise the original intentions of the work's author, as contained in the fabric of the work itself."³⁸ Given this predilection it is not surprising that, along with his Shakespearean productions, Appia concentrated mainly in the field of opera. Clearly, parallels can be found between Appia's attempts both to theorise and to realise Wagner's ambitions, and Michael Powell's own highly operatic ideal of the composed film (i.e. film shot to a pre-recorded score).³⁹ The closely synthesised fluidity Appia strove for emerges again in the work of Powell and Pressburger's designer Hein Heckroth.⁴⁰ Appia's anti-realist designs paved the way for Expressionism, and also for Reinhardt's more general reaction against Naturalism and his development of a genuine experience of theatrical synaesthesia. Indeed, as J. L. Styan notes in his biography of Reinhardt, "he cannot have done less than devour Appia's *Music and the Art of Theatre*, and, later, the inspirational essays of Gordon Craig."⁴¹

³⁸ Richard C. Beecham, *Adolphe Appia: Artist and Visionary of the Modern Theatre* (Harwood Academic Publishers: Reading, 1994), p. 162. Appia's interest in a form of 'Gesamtkunstwerk' which nevertheless prioritised musical expression is also noted in James Roose-Evans, *Experimental Theatre: From Stanislavsky to Today* (Studio Vista: London, 1973), p. 42.

³⁹ Michael Powell, *A Life in Movies* (Mandarin: London, 1992), p. 581.

⁴⁰ See Section 5.1.1 of this thesis for a fuller discussion of Heckroth's work, and how it differs from Alfred Junge's.

⁴¹ J. L. Styan, *Max Reinhardt* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1982), p. 12.

It is with regard to his comments on the role of the actor that designer and artist Edward Gordon Craig's importance should be noted. While Appia and Craig never worked together, their names are inevitably linked, each of being influential in the call for a strongly visual theatrical aesthetic. The son of Ellen Terry and godson of Henry Irving, Craig was the foremost writer on theatre of his day, his major work, *The Art of the Theatre* (written between 1904 and 1910) being translated into German and proving hugely influential to a German theatre seeking to reject realism and to revitalise itself with revolutionary new styles.⁴² Craig gave fervid expression to the rejection of bourgeois realism by envisaging an ideally 'actorless' theatre, yearning (theoretically) for what he terms the 'Über-marionette' (the word echoes Nietzsche) to replace real people on stage. This should be seen as a logical extension of his rejection of naturalism. "Do away with the real tree," he writes, "do away with the reality of action, and you tend towards the doing away with the actor ... Do away with the actor, and you do away with the means by which a debased stage-realism is produced and flourishes. No longer would there be a living figure to confuse us into connecting actuality and art; no longer a living figure in which the weakness and tremors of the flesh were perceptible."⁴³ Rather than literally championing puppetry, of course, his call for the Über-marionette is motivated by a wish, not just to escape the mimetic in art, but to escape the constraints of the human body itself. This body is biologically bogged down in the aesthetics of naturalism, and as such is "by nature utterly useless as a material for an art."⁴⁴ Emancipation from this corporeal bondage is available to the actors he envisages and whom he wishes to inspire: "To-day they *impersonate* and

⁴² Edward Gordon Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre* (Heinemann Educational Books Ltd: London, 1980).

⁴³ Craig, p. 75.

⁴⁴ Craig, p. 61.

interpret; and the third day they must create. By this means style may return.”⁴⁵ Craig’s visionary aspirations mirror the Kantian idealism so prominent in German intellectual thought. In a characteristic bout of romantic fervour, he clarifies that “The Über-marionette is the actor plus fire, minus egoism: the fire of the gods and demons, without the smoke and steam of mortality.”⁴⁶

The spirit’s struggle to transcend human limits; the recourse to anti- or non-rational energies; the fractured identity of the alienated artist: this is the stuff of Romanticism which would later feed into the abstract extremes of Expressionism. While Craig was careful to stress that the extremity of style he called for should be an authentic spiritual expression and no mere outburst of histrionics, his own family background - together with acting experience he himself had gained at London’s Lyceum Theatre - suggest that traditions of Victorian melodrama, with its own grandiloquent gestures, may well have fed into his writings and hence influenced the developments on the German stage. Certainly the ‘mythic aspiration’ which melodrama sought was also integral to the German stage. Michael Patterson’s account of Expressionist theatre suggests that its ‘hero’ was “constantly straining towards superhuman ecstasy.”⁴⁷ He abandoned civilised restraint in favour of religious/spiritual/sexual fulfilment marked by a primitivist aesthetic where just a scream (‘der Schrie’) became the exclamatory articulation of this radical psychological state.”⁴⁸ Expressionist acting, under the sway of Craig’s writings, had an extreme physicality and a raw emotionality. Tumultuous, mannered, abrupt - the acting style associated with the Expressionist stage is one which

⁴⁵ Craig, p. 61.

⁴⁶ Craig, p. ix.

⁴⁷ Michael Patterson, *The Revolution in German Theatre, 1900-1933* (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1981), p. 58.

⁴⁸ Patterson, p. 77.

embodies a struggle between control and anarchy, between the stifling confinement of the flesh and the abstract passion of the spirit. Again, Craig fervently apprehends this crisis: “Fearful is the struggle between cry (*Schrie*) and voice. It bursts from the mouth as a shriek - a scream of horror and anger. It must become voice again in order to be effective. Cool speech rolls towards passionate agitation - the molten must become rigid in form - and the harder and colder the language, the more turbulent and moving the emotion will be.”⁴⁹ We will encounter this conflict between control and anarchy, and the extremity of Craig’s *Schrie* in the next chapter’s assessment of Conrad Veidt and Anton Walbrook.

4.1.4: Expressionism and its part in Cinema

Compelled as it was by the urgent impulse to attack bourgeois culture (spurred on by the crisis of the War), Expressionism is marked by radical contortions, by an exaggerated and muscular form, and this violence is a mark of its intense reaction against mechanisation, urban dystopia, and social constraint. It is in this respect that it attempts to break with the recent tradition, staking its claim within the a broader European Modernism. Yet Expressionism has also been deemed “the revolt of the spirit against reality,” implicitly binding it to a tradition of nineteenth century metaphysical idealism.⁵⁰

Expressionism was a backlash against the materialistic. Indeed, as Peter Nicholls notes, “(Expressionists) were keen to stress that their new art would inaugurate a spiritual age no longer tainted by nineteenth century materialism, and that their modernism would thus renew connections with the art of earlier epochs.”⁵¹ Expressionism is the delinquent

⁴⁹ Craig, quoted in Patterson. p. 57.

⁵⁰ Furness. p. 172.

⁵¹ Peter Nicholls, *Modernism: A Literary Guide* (MacMillan: Basingstoke, 1995), p. 141.

offspring of Neo-Romanticism, engaging in direct social protest to rebel against its seemingly effete parent, amplifying its traits and fixating upon the irrational to establish its avant-garde credentials. It is an art of protest.

Unlike Surrealism (the more radically anarchic movement which it arguably fostered), no clear manifesto of Expressionist intent exists and only in retrospect may it be viewed as a 'movement', lacking as it did any organised cohesion and emerging more as a rush of cultural activity among various disciplines than as a precisely drawn 'school'. A flurry of often short-lived journals proliferated, although these tended to provide an opportunity for publication of Expressionist works rather than an ongoing theoretical debate over the meanings of the movement. The most famous of these was the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter*, of which only one issue appeared in 1912, although a group of artists including its editor Kandinsky would exhibit together and later come to be known as the *Blaue Reiter* group. At the time, as Norbert Lynton remarks, "the word Expressionism tended to mean nothing more precise than anti-naturalistic subjectivism."⁵² The inner life is favoured over the empirically sensed, external sphere, and it gravitates towards the operations of the unconscious, particularly towards the violent convulsions which figure so prominently in the dynamics of Freudian psychology. Destabilisation, disintegration, fragmentation: this becomes its natural territory, an expressive distortion of reality, an objectivisation of the subjective world which strives to encapsulate alienation, paranoia and madness: the collapse of the stable ego. While the movement may be dated from the establishment of the journal *Die Brücke* in Dresden in 1905, its peak being achieved during the Great War, it had been heralded artistically by the passionately deformed images of Vincent van Gogh, by Gauguin's celebratory rejection of European civilisation,

⁵² Norbert Lynton, 'Expressionism', in Nikos Stangos (ed.), *Concepts of Modern Art* (Thames & Hudson: London, 1981), p. 35.

and by the visualised angst of Munch, in whose *The Scream* of 1893 we find the paradigmatic image of the Expressionist condition *par excellence*.

From Kandinsky's paintings to Schoenberg's atonal compositions, from the three-dimensional design and architecture taught at the Bauhaus (which Walter Gropius opened at Weimar in 1919) to the symbolic drama of George Kaiser and Frank Wedekind: Expressionism developed across the arts. Kaiser's trilogy *Die Koralle*, *Gas I*, and *Gas II* of 1917-20 provided the plot of Lang's *Metropolis* (Conrad Veidt's first theatrical success was in the premier of *Die Koralle* in January 1917).⁵³ From Wedekind's tragedy *Lulu* came both G. W. Pabst's *Pandora's Box*, and Alban Berg's opera *Lulu*. Like the final section of Paul Leni's 1924 omnibus film *Waxworks*, *Lulu* features the character of Jack the Ripper, the bogeyman whose monstrous (and crucially unresolved) crimes make him the demonic archetype of Expressionism, fascinated as it is by the paranoia, uncertain or unstable identity and the sense of the uncanny which we associate with the horror genre. Hitchcock's *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog* (1926) likewise uses Jack the Ripper, and the director has admitted the influence of German film-making on the work.⁵⁴

Michael Powell clearly saw the importance of Hitchcock's experience in Germany, recollecting *The Lodger* as "an atmospheric thriller about a mysterious young man who could conceivably be, in his spare time, Jack the Ripper, or Mack the Knife, or any of the murderous sex maniacs so dear to the home-loving Germans."⁵⁵ It is important to note here that Hitchcock's apprenticeship in Germany at UFA and at Emelka would be as

⁵³ J. C. Allen, *Conrad Veidt: From Caligari to Casablanca* (The Boxwood Press: Los Angeles, 1987), p. 19.

⁵⁴ Ryall, p. 24.

⁵⁵ Powell, p. 182.

decisive an influence on British inter-war cinema as the arrival of émigrés in this country from Germany.

Even though this film-making can be seen as avant-garde experimentation, it nevertheless contended with the need to appeal to a public audience, and those 'art-house' films which belong to the Expressionist movement were nevertheless geared to the market place. Not surprisingly, therefore, the studio-produced films deriving from this contemporary 'art' culture lack some part of that rebellious impetuosity which characterises extremes of Expressionist painting. While these films distort reality, their abstraction is diluted. In any event, Lotte Eisner calculates that in post-war Germany the rate of production was around 210 films per year, and the vast majority of those belonged to popular genres: historical dramas, detective stories, soap operas and light comedies (in addition to this impressive figure, imports from Hollywood, particularly the hugely popular westerns, always threatened domestic production -this influx of foreign films was arrested by the War and allowed for the rapid expansion of domestic production).⁵⁶ The bulk of German cinema does not, therefore, take an oppositional stance to Hollywood, and cannot rightly be considered as a representing a minority sub-culture. The presence of a commercially motivated star-system in Germany - something normally associated with the fetishised and glamorised Hollywood product - confirms the character of mainstream German film-making at the time, and thanks to Film Europe some of this popularism was exported overseas.

This said, the high-art aspirations of the German stage found their way into the picture houses. Celebrated stage actors - Paul Wegener, Conrad Veidt, Werner Krauss, Willhelm Dieterle, and Albert Bassermann - became stars of German cinema. As in Britain

⁵⁶ Eisner, p. 310.

and France German film-making borrowed from its native theatrical culture. What distinguishes this transition in Germany is that rather than exploiting proven stage successes for commercial reasons, and doing nothing to counteract the opinion that film as an art form was subservient to literature and the stage, German experimental filmmakers drew strength from the resurgence of experiment within German theatre. They operated within a counter-cinema and sought a fresh visual approach at the creative vanguard of production.⁵⁷ Rachel Low has similarly acknowledged the various anti-naturalistic shifts in European theatre, and admits that the “creative upheaval” in stage design, frequently reviewed in the journal *The Studio*, may well have had an impact on cinema.⁵⁸

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No rigid canon of Expressionist films has been fixed, but only a tiny percentage of the studio output is admissible for inclusion, and apart from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and the concluding short section of *Waxworks*, candidature remains disputed.⁵⁹ Two celebrated films from this period illustrate significant trends: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, which stands as the high point of Expressionism within cinema; and Fritz Lang's *M* (from 1931), which combines a tightly controlled design - and a narrative which owes something to an expressionistic heritage - with a broadly realistic milieu.

⁵⁷ see Salt, B., ‘From Caligari to Who?’, *Sight and Sound*, vol. 48, Spring 1979, p. 121.

⁵⁸ Rachel Low, *The History of the British Film, 1918-1929* (George Allen and Unwin Ltd.: London, 1971), p. 247. As Low points out, Edward Gordon Craig's own son, Edward Carrick, became a successful cinema designer himself.

⁵⁹ Barry Salt's list of Expressionist cinema runs to six works: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), *Genuine* (dir. Robert Wiene, 1920), *Von Morgens bis Mitternacht* (dir. Karl Heinz Marlin, 1920), *Torgus* (dir. H. Kobe, 1921), *Raskolnikov* (dir. Robert Wiene, 1923), and *Waxworks*, with the possible additional inclusion of Lang's *Metropolis*. See Salt, pp. 119-123.

The Cabinet of Dr Caligari tells of the fairground mountebank Caligari (Werner Krauss) and his somnabulist 'creature' Cesare (Conrad Veidt), over whom he wields a demonic power (their Italianate names indicate the gothic credentials of the film, for the gothic typically finds its ritual demons in the 'obscure' practices of Mediterranean Catholic culture). Maintaining another formal convention, *Caligari* is structured as a tale within a tale, confusing the relationship between reality and the imagination by incorporating a range of perspectives into the narrative. Within the gothic form this blurring of reality produces a sense of ontological disquiet. The framing device in *Caligari* defers its revelation that Francis, the storyteller, is suffering from insanity, and the effect of this postponed disclosure is to undermine the spectator's identification with what has hitherto been presented as his reliable narration (albeit that his tale seems marvellous, and is entirely locked within an abstract mise-en-scène).⁶⁰ The discovery that Francis is a madman permits the irrational world of the film to be dismissed as the ranting of a lunatic, and therefore acts as a recuperating agent, re-stabilising the text. The Caligari of the story is revealed to be a delusional displacement of the asylum director (both are played by Werner Krauss), and it is this director who offers the only voice of sanity in the film. Thus the troubled spectator is *either* abandoned to the chaos of a paranoid fantasy or must identify with the patriarchal authority figure. In this sense, *Caligari* seems reactionary. However, the sum of the images presented remains ambivalent, for, until that closing denouement, 'reality' has been a studio-bound landscape of painted flats, artificial backdrops, warped perspectives and, in the acting of Werner Krauss and Conrad Veidt, unnatural, mannered movements (and the final asylum scene in the exterior story does

⁶⁰ Lotte Eisner relies upon Kracauer's evidence that the prologue and epilogue of the film were added as an afterthought despite the objections of the authors. Werner Sudendorf, however, confirms that the framework was outlined in Carl Mayer's original script. See Eisner, p.18; and Werner Sudendorf, 'Expressionism and Film: The Testament of Dr Caligari', in Behr *et al* (eds.), p. 95.

little more than gesture towards a realistic portrayal). What *Caligari* presents, almost entirely, is a solipsistic world of mental torment, lacking any external referent, and with what is belatedly shown to be an unreliable narration: as such it must be considered a radical Expressionist text which resists explication, notwithstanding that its avant-garde credentials are ultimately compromised by its failure to maintain its unstable subject position.

Thomas Elsaesser suggests that real parallels exist between the Romantic agonies of the Gothic novel of the early nineteenth Century and the German cinema of the 1910s and 1920s, and convincingly explains the historical context against which these old motifs are re-presented on film.⁶¹ He insists rightly upon “recovering the historical dimension of the uncanny,”⁶² pointing to the ways in which artists of the 1830s responded to changing relations of production, as the development of the market reduced their control over the reproduction and distribution of their work:

To some of Hoffmann’s tales, notably *The Sandman* or *Mlle de Scuderi*, and to Balzac’s early stories, applies what Marx (as early as 1830) wrote about alienation and reification, namely that in the capitalist production process, the product confronts the producer as something alien, and his own person comes to seem to him uncanny.⁶³

Similarly, of course, works such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* can be seen to embody the author’s sense of anxiety.⁶⁴ Elsaesser draws a direct comparison between this process

⁶¹ Thomas Elsaesser, ‘Social Mobility and the Fantastic: German Silent Cinema’, in James Donald (ed.), *Fantasy and the Cinema* (B.F.I. Publishing: London, 1989).

⁶² Elsaesser, p. 31.

⁶³ Elsaesser, p. 31.

⁶⁴ Notably, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have argued that the specific anxiety’s of 19th century women writers are projected into their texts, where the narrative struggle to contain or to exorcise them. See Sandra M Gilbert & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Yale University Press: New Haven,

and the conditions of the 1920s, at which point in history the power of technological reproduction and the emergence of a mass media asserts itself into the realm of artistic creativity (not least in cinema). In the intellectual counter-cinema of Weimar Germany we can see the self-conscious depiction of such anxieties in the fixations with the doppelganger and the Faustian overreacher: meta-cinematic projections of directorial unease.

In Expressionist film, the fairground is a symbolic space. It is not a playful, celebratory site of escape from bourgeois restrictions. Rather, it is a place to be feared, where horrors are confronted. Folktales have their wild woods; Expressionism has its fairgrounds. Paul Coates argues that this recurring motif is evidence of an art-cinema building into itself metaphors of its own origins in order to exorcise its disreputable history. The cinema of illusion developed as a critically disparaged fairground attraction (like Caligari's somnabulist), and thus "the fun-fair is demonised by a would-be intellectual cinema seeking to escape its own vulgar origins."⁶⁵

Seductive though this argument undoubtedly is, for the bourgeoisie the image of the carnival has always elicited an equivocal mixture of desire and dread. The marginalisation of carnival can be seen as a symptom of the emergence of the bourgeoisie, which reinforced its respectability by suppressing the pleasures of the carnivalesque: here, its demonised form is evidence of that society's vulnerability to a neurotic return of the repressed.⁶⁶ Of course, for films which deal with obsessional behaviour, the big wheel is an apt metaphor, for not only does it comment metafictionally upon the repetitions of the plot, but its endlessly driven

1979).

⁶⁵ Paul Coates, *The Gorgon's Gaze: German Cinema, Expressionism, and the Image of Horror* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1991), p. 28.

⁶⁶ For a historical reading of these processes of repression, return and ritual re-enactment, see Peter Stallybrass & Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Methuen: London., 1986).

circularities also signify visually the workings of unconscious *drives* writ large (in the Freudian ballet sequence from *The Red Shoes* Heckroth's design incorporates just such a dream-carnival setting). Paul Leni's *Waxworks* repeats *Caligari*'s structure of embedded tales (this time more explicitly), and similarly makes dramatic use of fairground attractions and pursuing demons. Particularly in its final tale (a dream-like sequence in which the hero is pursued through the fair by Jack the Ripper), it fulfils what I take to be Expressionism's defining characteristic, namely the 'objective' depiction of states of psychological disturbance and existential insecurity (and the Red Shoes Ballet seems to invoke directly the memory of Leni's nightmarish fairground pursuit).

The spectacle of Powell and Pressburger (especially in the post-war melodramas and operas) belongs in part to this culture, although it differs in one important respect. The 'cinema of attractions' to which Powell and Pressburger's work belongs *celebrates* the production process, and is a confident expression of authorial display, rather than of authorial unease. Powell and Pressburger, of course, do not work within an avant-garde. Fundamentally, they belong to popular cinema, one less ashamed of the fairground, perhaps. This said, in their troubling, troubled authority figures we see a vestige of this romantic-gothic culture.

In Fritz Lang's *M*, Expressionist effects are deployed tactically and tension is created by its gestures towards the uncanny. It is this form of cinema, rather than the eccentricities of *Caligari*, which has had the greater influence, not least through Lang's emigration to the USA and the *noir* work he produced there. Powell and Pressburger's work often owes a debt to Langian *mise-en-scène*, as does some of Hitchcock's British films (for example, *Sabotage* (1936)). The world of *M* is nominally realistic but is made strange. It is what Rosemary Jackson has theorised as a "paraxis" (an area adjacent to the 'axis' of normality, but displaced from it). For Jackson, this is "the place, or space, of the

fantastic...(not) entirely 'real' (object), nor entirely 'unreal' (image), but...located somewhere indeterminately between the two."⁶⁷ By incorporating an 'expressionistic' mise-en-scène into a conventional narrative for the purpose of dramatic intensity, subjective anxieties are given expression. Lang's mise-en-scène illustrates transactions between environment and pathology, as drawing on melodramatic processes, the design of the film is often an external rendition of the protagonist's psyche. Gledhill has noted this process as typical of melodrama: "Internalisation of the social" she suggests, "is accompanied by a process of exteriorisation in which emotional states or moral conditions are expressed as the actions of melodramatic types."⁶⁸

Ostensibly, *M* adheres to a documentary pattern, using location footage to follow the forensic investigations of the Dusseldorf police in their efforts to solve a series of child murders. In tension with this detailed and realistic attention to police procedures, the narrative is related to more typically expressionistic 'monster' stories, as the murderer, played by Peter Lorre, is shown to be an insanely pathological recidivist. *M* invests sympathy in the murderer. This is created chiefly through Lorre's performance, particularly during his 'trial' sequence, in which he pleads to a hungry mob. This deviates from generic convention, and can be read progressively: rather than being demonised and then exorcised (as in conventional forms of the horror genre, which dramatises the ritual destruction or expulsion of a monster which represents the embodied externalisation of society's phobias), here the murderer is rescued from the mob by forces of order, to be incorporated into, and managed within, the existing legal and medical framework. Powell

⁶⁷ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (Methuen: London, 1981), p. 19.

⁶⁸ Gledhill, p. 210.

and Pressburger will show their own sympathy for the devil from *The Spy in Black* through Lermontov's charisma to Powell's own *Peeping Tom*.

Lang draws upon a store of familiar visual tropes (chiaroscuro lighting effects exemplifying Lorre's paranoia; angled shots illustrating his vulnerability at the hands of the mob), and he self-consciously acknowledges a heritage of Expressionism: thus the blind balloon seller who recognises the murderer's whistling leitmotif recollects the grim carnival of the demonic fairground. His balloons are both desired objects with which child victims are tempted, and are synecdochal substitutes for the murdered children themselves (toys and puppets in shop-windows, and a little girl's ball in the opening sequence, have the same function). They are both malicious and pathetic, mocking the victim's vulnerability, evoking pity for the victims, and pointing to the protagonist's world of infantile irrationality.⁶⁹

These then are some of the cultural trends which we see migrating into British cinema throughout the 'thirties, a shift which preceded the establishment of tightly drawn 'national' cinematic criteria. A rejection of Naturalism; mystical aspirations and the hint of the Sublime drawn from Neo-Romanticism; a controlled mise-en-scène and expressive camera-work acknowledging its debts to both Reinhardt and Expressionism. These factors would all contribute to Powell and Pressburger's aesthetic.



⁶⁹ The funfair image persists in later tributes to Expressionism: in the work of Carol Reed and Orson Welles. Harry Lime's speech in the deserted Viennese funfair in *The Third Man*; the balloon seller and the child's ball in the same film; and the Hall of Mirrors in Welles' *The Lady From Shanghai* (1947). The carnival sequence in Powell and Pressburger's *The Red Shoes* ballet shares the dream-quality of the final nightmarish segment of *Waxworks*, as Vicky descends into an underworld which is clearly coded as her unconscious. The murder in Alfred Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* (1951) similarly takes place in a fairground, and culminates on a merry-go-round out of control. This film, as with *The Third Man*, also draws on a typical 'double' device.

4.2: Two Case Studies: *The Spy in Black* and Anton Walbrook

4.2.1: *The Spy in Black*: Nosferatu at Hoy

The first part of this chapter looks at *The Spy in Black*, which stars Conrad Veidt and is readable as an homage to German cinema. To complement his role in this film, the second part gives attentions to the significance of Anton Walbrook. Together they suggest that both Veidt's star presence, and the semiotics of Walbrook's performances, import a German aesthetic into British cinema. This is what their very presence often dramatises (more general assessments of two of Walbrook's films, *Colonel Blimp*, and *The Red Shoes* are to be found in Chapters 3.1 and 5.1 respectively). In their earliest collaborations Powell and Pressburger consciously draw upon Expressionistic motifs and articulate anxieties regarding the disintegration of identity - a disintegration which is directly relevant to the outbreak of the War. It is with this in mind that we should consider *The Spy in Black* (their next film, *Contraband*, repeats the successful pairing of Conrad Veidt and Valerie Hobson, and reworks some of the spy genre / noir motifs of the earlier work, this time given a contemporary London setting).

The Spy In Black is Powell and Pressburger's first collaboration. It is a genre piece, conforming to patterns derived from popular spy/thriller fiction and film. In particular, the influence of Hitchcock is obvious. The mixture of suspense, comedy and romance found in his work at Gaumont-British from 1934 to 1938 (in the sextet of films, *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934), *The Thirty Nine Steps*, *Secret Agent*, *Sabotage*,

Young and Innocent (1937) and *The Lady Vanishes* (1938)) is here re-worked. The Langian feel of *Sabotage*, with its alien yet partly sympathetic villain, is echoed in the plot and the dark mise-en-scène of *The Spy in Black*; and the Veidt/Hobson relationship in both *The Spy in Black* and particularly in *Contraband* plainly repeats the Donat/Carroll coupling in *The Thirty Nine Steps*. By 1939, Powell had had experience of working in popular cinema genres. His earliest work in Britain was predominantly on quota-quickies, and of the twenty three films he directed between 1931 and 1936 (from his arrival as a film-maker in Britain until the appearance of *Edge of the World*), I calculate that some fifteen have plots concerning murder, theft, or, with *The Red Ensign*, industrial espionage; the remainder can be classed as romantic comedies, musical fantasy or, in one case, Ruritanian melodrama. This work conforms to popular genre expectations. In his excellent survey of so-called “Celluloid Shockers” - the spy and crime thrillers of the 1930s - James Chapman makes the point that while spy stories had been popular in print form at the turn of the century, “as a film genre the spy narrative flourished again during the late 1930s when another international crisis was looming on the horizon,” adding that in 1939 “a plethora” of spy films were made.¹ Such films, popular and cheaply made, are clearly part of an indigenous culture of sensational escapism, and Hitchcock’s contributions are to be regarded as high quality products of that same established tradition.

While it structures itself around the spy/thriller genre, and as such is rooted in popular English writing, *The Spy in Black* also owes a debt to another related tradition, namely that of the gothic. While this tradition in literature is directly part of a nineteenth century melodramatic and ‘penny dreadful’ popular culture, its presence in *The Spy in*

¹ James Chapman. ‘Celluloid Shockers’. in Jeffrey Richards (ed.) *The Unknown 1930s: An Alternative History of the British Cinema, 1929-1939* (Athlone Press: London, 1998), p. 93.

Black is mediated through the ‘horror’ narratives of Romantic German cinema. Traces of F.W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu, Eine Symphonie des Grauens* (1922), itself of course a trans-nationally hybrid work, are to be found in *The Spy in Black*; and with a storyline substantially re-drafted by Pressburger to provide a star vehicle for Conrad Veidt (who, for Powell, “was the great German cinema”²) it stands as an homage to the German film industry. The gothic, with its melodramatic plots, hidden secrets, malevolent forces and outbreaks of irrationality, forms part of the same sensational popular entertainment culture as the spy story. The espionage sub-genre can be said to wed those thrills to a foregrounded national ideology, so the connections between the British spy films and German cinema is understandable both in terms of the real transfer of German personnel into the British industry at a time when such films had a popular currency, and also to the tradition of nineteenth century gothic-romance which runs through each. The priority given to controlled design in the German studios made that system a perfect medium for gothic tales which operate by creating visual images of psychological or supernatural disturbance.

As its opening shots make clear, *The Spy in Black* is set in 1917, yet it speaks to the events of 1939 and anticipates the conditions of the Second World War. Its theme of espionage thus has an apparent topicality; the footage of warships in its closing reel seems from this distance to be part of the vocabulary of the early 1940s’ actuality news and documentary coverage (and the sequence in which Hardt’s submarine negotiates the minefield on the approach to Hoy has the look of what would come to be a familiar Second World War film scenario). Its symbolic use of lighting codes would come to form the visual ‘narrative’ of the blackout; and its motif of hardship - particularly the lack of

² Michael Powell. *A Life in Movies* (Mandarin: London, 1992), p. 305.

good food - looks forward to the austerity of rationing. But filming was actually completed by March 1938, and it was released in the U.K. on 12th August, 1939, a few weeks before the German invasion of Poland (the Archers's next work, *Contraband*, released in May, 1940, was one of the first feature films to *actually* depict the wartime Home Front). What *The Spy in Black* in fact presents is a mythical recurrence of the conditions of the First World War, while its use of a German spy conveniently recycles a popular bogeyman of popular thriller fiction. The self-consciousness of a narrative written by an 'alien' which treats of an heroic German in Britain during wartime clearly sets up a range of ironic identifications which will undo simply polarised constructions of the 'Other'.

Popular culture, of course, articulates present anxieties. It is a characteristic of the spy genre that it encodes fears for the well-being of the nation. Inherently it deals with international politics - although in its modern manifestations, in a global world of multi-nationals, it also concerns itself with the sphere of corporate espionage. The 'thriller' elements of the genre has a genealogy traceable to the violence and mystery of Poe, Conan Doyle and Wilkie Collins (and of course in Poe the intimacy between the detective story, the spy genre and the gothic tale of horror is made evident). However, another source of the spy story is located in the adventure myths of empire. Such tales celebrated the twin virtues of Englishness and masculinity, where the fate the nation was invested in an emblematic hero (see Chapter 3.1 for a discussion of Korda's adaptations of such narratives).³ But whereas the adventure tale confidently shored up the ideology of

³ There is no space here to catalogue more than the key texts. Kipling's *Kim* (1901) sees its boy hero recruited into a world of Imperial espionage; Erskine Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903) tells of the discovery of an invasion plot; and the work of John Buchan, such as *The Thirty Nine Steps* (1915), binds together Victorian adventure and the spy genre. A clear case can be made for adding *The Spy in Black* to this list. It started life as a story by J. Storer Clouston, who published in *Blackwood* magazine - the journal with whom both John Buchan and Robert Louis Stevenson had written (although by the time it reached the screen it had been very substantially re-structured. See Powell (1992), p. 300.

Empire, the thriller, as Michael Denning has noted, “became a compensatory myth of the crisis of imperialism.”⁴ A definitive shift is marked between the confident certainties of adventure and the doubts of the spy genre, and by unpacking the implications of this change the *noirish* look of *The Spy in Black* can be accounted for. The tropes of noir - chiaroscuro lighting, unstable situations - are visual imprints or externalisations of paranoia: here a paranoia which is readable in immediately political terms (fear of invasion by foreign power) but is also decodable more generally as an expression of existential insecurity, as an uncanny encounter with evil which threatens the stability of the subject. Broadly speaking (and admitting the generalisation), an assertive stance has been replaced by a defensive one. Any simple binarisms (Good/Evil, Us/Them, Dominant/Subservient) are complicated by confusions of identity, by ethical problems, and ultimately by a troubling realisation that even the Self may be corrupt.

The Spy in Black commences stably enough. Graphics tell us we are in Kiel, 1917, and that this is the base of the German navy, while a snatch of the German national anthem is heard over the opening credits. In the Kielerhof Hotel a newspaper headline announcing the success of the German U-boat food blockade is welcomed, and Captain Hardt’s return to the hotel, exhausted and hungry after his recent mission, marks him as a hero of the maritime campaign. Attractive, honest and principled, his solitude and his leadership qualities are Romantic stuff, as his name, Ernst Hardt - ‘earnest heart’ - signifies. Veidt can convey austerity, or gravitas: this can give him the appearance of either authority or menace. A throwaway comment that he “*never* smokes a pipe” suggests he is a creature of habit, connoting the qualities of permanence, of stable parameters, which Hardt invokes. Later, at sea, he is pedantic regarding time, correcting his subordinates to the

⁴ Michael Denning, *Cover Stories: Narrative and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller* (Routledge: London, 1987), p. 39.

minute and ensuring that their sealed orders are not opened until exactly '11:15'. He stands for the military virtues of clarity and precision and is committed to the rational. Yet already there are hints of the unfamiliarity to come: the story's triumphalist rhetoric regarding food shortages in Britain seems to be undone by the establishment's apparently empty kitchens, while a close-up of the newspaper headline in the Kielerhof Hotel shows most of the story blanked out by a large "Censored" sign. Tensions between disclosure and non-disclosure are a characteristic of the uncanny (as Freud's reading of the semantic levels in the German words *Heimlich* and *Unheimlich* has shown).⁵ In harking back with acute topicality to the misinformation and the secrets of an earlier conflict, Pressburger's script gives a fresh immediacy to what are romantic-gothic motifs. More impressionistically, Hardt's job - he is the captain of a submarine - symbolically invites a psychological reading of the film which foregrounds the importance of the submerged, of the unconscious. Ordered undercover, Hardt descends into a morally corrupt and potentially corrupting universe, where he will struggle against the irrational. The tidy national demarcations coded in the fragment of the German anthem are set to blur.

Hardt's orders are to go ashore on Hoy and to make contact with Fraulein Tiel, a German agent posing as a school teacher. His unseen superiors have provided him with his own tweed suit as a disguise, re-labelling it with a Saville Row trademark and anglicising his name (with a passing allusion to a literature of doubling, collapsed identity and the fantastic, the suit was originally bought from 'Hoffmann' in Berlin!). But Hardt, refusing to be disguised, clings to his authenticity. "Try to make a spy out of me!" he snorts resentfully, and later, when he is seen to be in the schoolhouse still in uniform, his response is that of the professional soldier: "If I am to be shot, it will be as an officer."

⁵ See Sigmund Freud, 'Das Unheimlich', in Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, Vol. XVII (Hogarth Press: London, 1955).

Despite his disgust at the world of espionage, a world in which Fraulein Tiel has prostituted herself to win the confidence of a disloyal British officer, his moral high ground is soon jeopardised by the simple accusation which Tiel makes in her defence: “Have *you* ever fired a torpedo at an unarmed ship?”

To don a disguise is to perform a masquerade, something which has a host of implications. Psychoanalytically, Joan Riviere’s use of the term ‘masquerade’ relates specifically to a defence mechanism whereby excessive gender traits are unconsciously adopted in order to avert social criticism.⁶ This performative quality opens up a potentially progressive space between ‘identity’ and ‘gender’ which feminist theory and queer theory have been quick to recognise.⁷ Riviere’s suggestion that gender is something to be assumed tends to de-essentialise identity itself. Here, despite Hardt’s resistance, he is dispatched into a spy genre in which subjectivity is mutable (and *national* identity is masqueraded), and while postmodern creeds would come to celebrate this very performativity as liberatory, with his strong investment in the authentic this is an invidious regime to Hardt, an alien territory of false appearances, of faulty vision, sophistry and betrayal (and thus his subsequently enforced impersonation of Reverend Harris in order to escape the island has important dramatic repercussions). The reality he is forced to adopt shifts him towards the radical criteria of Expressionism, which, as we have already established, focuses upon psychological disturbance and existential insecurity.

Hardt’s experiences are characteristic of the spy genre. National fate determined by the actions of an emblematic individual (part of its Romantic heritage); hero and/or villain positioned as outsider (likewise a trace of Romanticism); secret operations to be

⁶ See Joan Riviere, ‘Womanliness and the Masquerade’, in Victor Burgin et al (eds) *Formations of Fantasy* (Routledge: London. 1986).

⁷ See for example. Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*, (Routledge: London. 1991).

identified; a world of conspiratorial menace: these are its traits, and when deployed they create suspense, excitement, vicarious thrills. Where *The Spy in Black* most obviously departs from this is in the identification it encourages with its alien protagonist, a sympathetic investment which (given the confused and collapsing identities which the film moves towards) will come to be acutely important ideologically. It further negates easy distinctions between Us and Them, but more immediately it is dramatically justified, promoting the sense of danger and tension which the thriller demands (Powell and Pressburger return to this structure in *49th Parallel*, where the protagonist is an unsympathetic Nazi, like Captain Hardt finding himself behind enemy lines, while later in *Colonel Blimp* they use Theo's presence in Britain to test the rhetoric of inclusivity associated with the 'People's War'). This crossing of boundaries onto foreign turf is central to Powell and Pressburger.

Perhaps the most important characteristic of the spy genre (something which cinematic versions of it clearly capitalise on) is the inevitable interest it shows in the act of *looking*. By emphasising problems of faulty perception, and undermining the trustworthiness of empirical evidence, it forges an affinity between audience and protagonist, whose very 'point of view' is by definition narrativised. As Tom Ryall has noted, "Appearances, the focal point of cinematic attention, are deceptive for both hero and spectator," with this shared experience forming "the definitional heart of the genre."⁸

Mirrors, windows and doorways - all framing the field of vision - feature throughout the film. It is a shot of what the chauffeuse sees in her rear-view mirror which first alerts us to the sinister nature of the lift being offered to the real schoolteacher, Anne

⁸ Tom Ryall, *Alfred Hitchcock and the British Cinema* (Athlone Press Ltd: London, 1996). pp. 124/125.

Burnett, who innocently provides her life story to the disguised German agents planning to take her place. Later, Hardt is guided to the schoolhouse by a light which Fraulein Tiel displays from her window (a light which the local constable, Bob Bratt, is quick to put out). In hiding in the schoolhouse, Hardt's entire frame of reference is limited to the views offered from its windows and roof-light: he is shown gazing at the British fleet in the harbour, and looking down at Fraulein Tiel in the class-room. Each of these views will prove to have been deceptive: the British cruiser squadrons are not his target, but a trap to lure the German U-boats into the bay; Fraulein Tiel, the substitute for Ann Burnett, has herself been replaced by a British agent, eventually named as Mrs. Blacklock (the character played by Valerie Hobson). This turning of the narrative tables is hidden from the audience until Hardt himself uncovers the deception. Until then, darkness masks the truth from us: while we see Anne Burnett's abduction, we cannot identify the agent to whom her clothes are delivered. She hides in a darkened cliff-top barn, and the substitution is screened from view. A splash is heard as something or someone (presumably the unconscious Anne Burnett) falls from the cliff into the sea, but the re-substitution of Fraulein Tiel for Mrs. Blacklock is not shown. "Where were your eyes man?" the British commander asks of Bob Bratt, who failed to notice the fleeing Hardt's impersonation of Reverend Harris. The need for vigilance during wartime may be obvious, but as *The Spy in Black* suggests, our senses may well be deceived. Until the dénouement, our point of view is often limited to that of the German agent, and our identification with him is thus propagated.

When distinct binary categories such as Good and Evil are jeopardised, as they are here, we shift into a liminal space, a territory which threatens any sense of stable selfhood. This is Hardt's experience. John G. Cawelti and Bruce A. Rosenberg suggest that the psychological tension brought on by the spy hero's clandestine life is like a state of

schizophrenia.⁹ Loosely speaking, they are right, although in layman's terms, paranoia and hysteria might also be ways of discussing the spy's response to his dual world. What Cawelti and Rosenberg point to is the dangerous 'shifting' which the spy must negotiate, mapping out "a boundary area in which the anxiety surrounding divergent worldviews can become so great that the secret agent passes beyond (any) stage of rational control over his divided self."¹⁰ What this hesitant, untrustworthy condition most resembles, however, is the fantastical structure associated with the gothic. While admittedly *The Spy in Black* and other examples of the genre exhibit no supernatural economy, a subversive 'other' still threatens to invade. Developments in gothic fiction throughout the nineteenth century saw a move away from a purely supernatural regime to a secular one in which the 'other' was allowed to be an externalisation of part of the self. Like melodrama, therefore, the quasi-uncanny nature of good and evil it summons up charts a culture realigning itself towards the post-sacred (see the discussion of melodrama in Section 4.1.2). The story of the secret agent, belonging to the same culture of sensational popular fiction, writes that structure into a national narrative. With *The Spy in Black*, the presence of germanic factors pulls the centre of gravity closer than usual towards the gothic. Presenting a circulation of desire, and a string of substitutions which renders identities illegible, the film consciously draws on this tradition (one which Veidt personifies). The very 'blackness' of its title is a relic of the genre's history of diabolic flirtation.

Crossing boundaries might be thought of as the key motif of the gothic. As a transgressive gesture, this marks it out as progressive or radical (Bakhtin has established the connection between the fantasies of writers such as Hoffmann and Poe and the

⁹ John G. Cawelti and Bruce A. Rosenberg. *The Spy Story* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1987), p. 17.

¹⁰ Cawelti and Rosenberg, p. 17.

fragmentation and disorderliness of the carnivalesque, with all its anarchic potential). To cross the boundary into the territory of the fantastic is to abandon rational knowledge - a knowledge founded in empiricism and anchored to the authority of the studied 'look' - and to enter an alien and alienating other-place in which the world is strange, signs are confounded or inverted, and an erstwhile sense of order is undone. In her detailed analysis of this regime, Rosemary Jackson offers the following conclusion, worth quoting at length:

Fantasies of deconstructed, demolished or divided identities and of disintegrated bodies, oppose traditional categories of unitary selves. They attempt to give graphic depictions of subjects *in process*, suggesting possibilities of innumerable other selves, of different histories, different bodies. They denounce the theses and categories of the thetic, attempting to dissolve the symbolic order at its very base, where it is established in and through the subject, where the dominant signifying system is re-produced ... (F)antasies image the possibility of radical cultural transformation through attempting to dissolve or shatter the boundary lines between the imaginary and the symbolic. They refuse the latter's categories of the 'real' and its unities.¹¹

The Spy in Black offers us states of 'process' (transitional spaces, mutable appearances), multiple metamorphoses of character (which can be read as projected fantasies), and a dissolution of the symbolic (signs hidden or misread). If these realignments are clued from the start, they are amplified at key moments in the narrative: notably, and increasingly (a) with the abduction of Miss Burnett on the Scottish mainland, where evil first shows its hand; (b) with the introduction of a sexualised atmosphere between Hardt and the woman he takes to be Fraulein Tiel; and (c) with his discovery of the British counter-plot.

¹¹ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (Methuen: London, 1981), p. 178.

The events leading to the abduction of Anne Burnett contain portents of what is to follow. As Anne's nanny shouts that it is time for her to commence her journey north, we see Anne's travel bag tumbling downstairs into close-up. "The handle broke" she explains, although other than being an omen of bad fortune (Anne will soon appear to be tumbled over the cliffs into the sea) the event has no other formal narrative justification. We learn that Anne is engaged to be married to Reverend John Harris, and as her nanny fusses over her, her inexperience becomes clear (her family's lack of worldliness is later revealed - her deceased father having been an unsuccessful architect and a tee-totaller). The innocent virgin, vulnerable on the eve of her wedding; absent or deficient parents: both are familiar gothic motifs of course. That liminal moment on the brink of marriage, the fear of the unknown given a specifically sexual encoding, and the lack of a (father) figure to offer guidance: these are gothic conditions *par excellence*. As they are pondering the late arrival of Anne's lift to the station, a dog barks to alert them to the arrival of a rich old lady in a car, a lady who will offer to take Anne herself. In the logic of horror, of course, animals instinctively detect the presence of danger, but Anne's nanny is blind to irony of her words: "It's certainly the hand of Providence that brought you here today" she innocently tells the old lady. Powell and Pressburger play with the levels of knowledge allowed to their audience, very much after the fashion of Hitchcock (thus we alone are shown that the old lady's chauffeuse has not taken the expected road to Dingwall). The false appearance of the old lady, of course, is typical of the genre. Later, the script makes explicit the scenario's indebtedness to myths of endangered virginity. "Do you know the story of Little Red Riding Hood?" the disguised Mrs. Blacklock asks Hardt, pointing out that for Anne, the story did not have a happy ending. The grandmaternal and the wolfish are one in the old lady, her black furs ambiguously denoting the menace she represents. Once Anne has been smothered, and malevolence has shown

itself, the first of the film's substitutions can take place. Here, a close-up shows Anne unconscious in the car. As readers of *Dracula* are aware, virgins are never more at risk than when asleep; moreover, the association between sleep and dreaming suggests an obvious parallel between the endangerment brought on by the presence of evil, and the fantasies, desires and fears of the unconscious. Later, a shot of the schoolteacher will catch her similarly napping.

A sexual charge between Hardt and Mrs Blacklock is established early on: after a first meal together, a post-prandially shared cigarette draws them together: Hardt notices her stockings; she adjusts her dress to hide them. The sexual politicking between them places 'Fraulein Tiel' - for so Mrs Blacklock seems to be - clearly in charge, but in the film's 'romance' plot, Hardt attempts to reassert his compromised masculinity. In keeping with generic conventions, the spy's world is traditionally one of male domination, with the hero's competitiveness ensuring his need to assert himself. When she rejects his initial advances and locks him in his bedroom, a brief fade to black (denoting a temporal elision) is barely sufficient to separate this proof of her domination from the sequence which follows: this footage of highly masculine naval weaponry, with close-up shots of machinery and of guns firing, is readable as either a fantasised displacement or an ironic compensation for the film's abandonment of Hardt's established martial credentials. It is a nostalgic return to the simple world of warfare which Hardt knew and understood in the first reel.

The Spy In Black owes something to the myths of vampires, and Hardt's vampiric qualities have already been hinted at. Repeated images of either him or 'Tiel' looking in out of windows resemble similar images in Murnau's *Nosferatu*. Hardt's way to the schoolhouse is signalled, as I have said, by a light shown from an upstairs window, and numerous cutaway shots of moonlight associate him with nocturnal behaviour. Features

which are entirely appropriate to the spy/war genre are thus also decodable from a gothic-romantic perspective. A beam of light from the schoolroom lures Hardt to 'Miss Tiel' just as surely as Dracula is drawn to his victims. The point to be made about Hardt, however, is that while Dracula, as gothic villain, is entirely 'other', and defies rationality, Hardt is ordered invidiously into this regime and becomes threateningly 'gothic' only because of the clandestine mode of existence he is forced into. Indeed, his fixed characteristics, his efficient military outlook, his pedantic punctuality (all shown in the first reel) mark him out initially as Stoker's emblem of rationality and clerkly precision, Jonathon Harker (who is likewise dispatched into 'alien territory' to be infected by the seductive approaches of the Other).

During their spell in the schoolhouse Hardt becomes more menacing. Hence while Lieutenant Ashington, the disloyal English officer, taps his fist prosaically on the schoolhouse window to gain admittance, Hardt's later signal to 'Tiel' is overloaded with gothic *mise-en-scène*: a silhouetted close-up of his long skeletal fingers rapping on the window pane, bare dead branches in the background and great swathes of mist in the darkness melodramatise his return to the schoolhouse: that 'Tiel' is wakened by his rapping, and the fact that a sexual desire has already been registered between them forces us to see the sequence in psychological terms (Hardt's sexual magnetism threatening the agent's straightforward commitment to her duty).

As their plot to demolish the British fleet seems to have been safely concluded, Hardt again attempts to seduce 'Miss Tiel'. Although again she offers resistance, this time his seduction is more successful. She protests vocally ("If I am in command I order you to let me go"), and the military/romantic conflation which marks their discourse echoes the blending of masculine adventure narrative and romance plot which often typifies the spy genre (while the possible shift in power between the two protagonists is clearly spoken

of in her protested “If...”!). But despite her protestation, it is she who half-unconsciously opens the hatchway which has been separating them, letting him enter through what is a highly symbolic doorway. This recurring fascination with doorways - whether locked or open - is an architectural rendition of the film’s exploration of crossed boundaries and transitional spaces (it is given a sexualised emphasis here). While Veidt is rarely given sufficient rein in this film to fully draw upon his wide acting technique, he is allowed to touch upon a hypnotic quality which recalls earlier roles (most famously of course, Cesare in *Dr. Caligari* and Ivan the Terrible in *Waxworks*). Frequent beautifully lit close-ups of his face, handsome, strong and intelligent, yes, but also suggestive of a studied menace, capitalise on this quality. Such close-ups in cinema can convey a level of expressivity which compensates for the grand gesture lost from the melodramatic stage. A shot of Veidt’s deep-set eyes, central to his narrative function as a spy, thus conveys all the villainy that the melodramatic actor might strive to embody.

The kiss which Hardt and ‘Tiel’ exchange, and her recoiling from it, form the next dramatic shift in the narrative, for it is at this belated stage that our assumptions regarding Miss Tiel’s loyalties are shown to have been misled (Hardt too learns that his trust in the ‘schoolteacher’ has been misplaced). ‘Miss Tiel’, assuming Hardt to be safely locked away, runs out to meet the man we have taken to be Ashington, and the truth that she is working for the British is revealed. In a crudely symbolic gesture, ‘Ashington’, in reality David Blacklock, later shown to be the husband of the ‘schoolteacher’, takes off his coat and gives it to her, his noble, knightly virtues being coded by the white jumper he is wearing. The contrast with the ‘spy in black’ could not be more clear.

The tightly designed mise-en-scène of the schoolroom (by Vincent Korda) now becomes far more meaningful, the style of the film growing markedly more expressionistic. After the fashion of Lang’s *M* it maintains a fidelity to objective realism but is heavily

overcoded with a disturbed and disturbing subjective ambience. While the visual traits of films such as *M* (typified in high-contrast chiaroscuro, shadows and occasionally in disorientating angles) are clearly expressions of subjective states, generally of paranoia, it is also a recurring feature of gothic tales that landscape and buildings assume the characteristics of their protagonists (secret rooms in old buildings, hidden entrances, labyrinthine passages, haunted places, Poe's "House of Usher" - they are all concrete metaphors for psychological conditions). The claustrophobic atmosphere of the schoolroom, with its awkward staircase and its low forbidding room beams, depicts the panic of entrapment, the destabilising effect of the narrative reversal, and the rapid realisation of betrayal with which Hardt has to contend. He is no longer the hunter but the hunted, lurking in shadows which visually represent his sense of persecution. Yet liberated from his room he still presents a threat. In the emblematic image of the film (a photographic still from this shot features emphatically during its opening title credits) he is seen silhouetted from behind in long shot blocking a closed doorway with his arms outstretched. He is leaning against the door frame, listening to the disclosure of the British counter-plot, but it is an arresting image, a dramatically ambiguous pose expressing both defiance and submission. It recollects a heritage of threatening or foreboding gestures, drawn from the gothic and familiar to the horror genre. Indeed, while Powell and Pressburger, inspired by German cinema, clearly seize the opportunity to overlay their spy story with elements of horror, the point can only be reiterated that the irruptions of malevolence and irrationality which structure the spy genre derive from this older form. In Jerry Palmer's words, "Underneath the paraphernalia of medieval castles and

persecuted virgins the core of the Gothic is terror through incomprehension. It is this that the thriller has borrowed, and incorporated.”¹²

Hardt manages to flee the island by boarding the St. Magnus steamer disguised as Reverend Harris (the unwitting fiancé of the real Anne Burnett, not seen since her abduction early in the film). His ministerial cloak immediately recollects the cape of a melodramatic stage villain, and the danger he represents to the passengers on board the steamer is evoked by what seem like conscious allusions to the ‘ship passage’ sequence in Murnau’s *Nosferatu*. Seen spying through portholes, he moves about the ship in silence, masquerading as that most comfortably familiar and established of things, an English parson (a prime instance of the *heimlich* becoming its opposite, the *un-Heimlich*, it also recollects the spiritual dimension with which the genre was once associated). This, of course, is part of the significance of his disguise: just as a grandmother figure was revealed to be a murderous secret agent earlier, the uniform Hardt wears hides a threat to the nation - and as Powell points out, in Storer Clouston’s original story the ‘spy in black’ had been a Scottish minister who had likewise used the uniform as a respectable disguise.¹³ Lotte Eisner found a similar structure of deceptive appearance in ‘expressionistic’ German cinema. In the process of doubling and mirroring which such gothic-romantic narratives present, “Caligari is both the eminent doctor and the fairground huckster. *Nosferatu* the vampire, also the master of a feudal castle, wishes to buy a house from an estate agent who is himself imbued with diabolism ... It would seem from this that for the Germans the demoniac side to an individual always has a middle class counterpart. In the ambiguous world of the German cinema, people are unsure of their identity and can

¹² Jerry Palmer, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre* (Edward Arnold: London, 1978), p. 127.

¹³ Powell (1992), p. 303.

easily lose it on the way.”¹⁴ While there may be methodological or theoretical problems with Eisner’s generalisations about the German race, it can still be stated that structurally the conflation of the familiar with the uncanny which she detects as being characteristic of the set of films she addresses is also something to be found in *The Spy in Black* (*Canterbury Tale*’s magistrate/Glueman repeats this gothic equivocation).

With German prisoners-of-war taken on board at Stromness, Hardt is furnished with a ‘tribe’ to assist him in taking over the steamer. The irony that these prisoners have been rescued when their own vessel was blown up on one of their own mines, is clear. It formally anticipates Hardt’s imminent destruction at the hands of his own U-boat, and like the hidden omens earlier which portend the abduction of Anne Burnett, it suggests that a predestined ‘Fate’ may be at work (one of the passengers on the steamer, echoing Anne’s nanny, will announce that they are “all in the hands of Providence”, while the ship’s engineer James is troubled by the German’s presence on board: “I am not a superstitious man but I don’t like it. They’re Jonahs, pure Jonahs!”).

The Romantic credentials of the film are thus clearly staked. But the invocation of the vampiric is also explicable from the heroine’s position. By unpacking the series of feminine substitutions which form the core of the film, Hardt’s Dracula-like appearance and the costume he selects, become particularly apt. The original Miss Burnett is engaged to Reverend Harris. The character played by Valerie Hobson who takes Anne’s place in the schoolroom is eventually revealed to be married to the English officer, David Blacklock, although for most of the film she is taken to be the German spy Fraulein Tiel, and her relationship with Blacklock is assumed to be another of the film’s masquerades. Pressburger’s narrative nevertheless explores the illicit, quasi-sexual relationship which

¹⁴ Lotte Eisner. *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt* (Secker & Walburg: London. 1973), p. 100.

develops between Hardt and the 'schoolteacher' (the original Miss Burnett was to have wed the distinctly undashing Reverend Harris; her replacement is clearly tempted away from her own husband by what seems a genuine desire for the exotic and attractive Hardt). It is entirely fitting, therefore, that Hardt should disguise himself as the original unsatisfactory partner, an exciting alternative to Reverend Harris, spicing up the remote and Romantic Orkneys. To Mrs. Blacklock, Hardt embodies a dangerous temptation, and thus it is in accordance with perverse gothic logic that she should be aboard the *St. Magnus*, fulfilling her position as maiden-in-peril as he becomes the vampire, summoned by her expression of unregulated sexuality.

In the concluding moments of *The Spy in Black*, the certainties of its opening reassert themselves. All deceptions are exposed. The convoluted complications of identity and loyalty re-polarise, and the narrative retreats from its expressionistically inflected chaos to re-stabilises itself into the simple verities of the war film:

Veidt : You are English. I am German. We are
 enemies.

Hobson: I like that better.

Veidt : And I. It simplifies everything.

Significantly, this re-ordering into the norms of a clearly recognised genre brings with it conventional footage of Royal navy vessels and of the sea battle which ensues. In a recent assessment of Conrad Veidt's work in British cinema, Sue Harper extracts these lines of dialogue as evidence that "Powell had an over-simplified notion of the tendency of Veidt's work... Veidt by that time excelled in portraying men who were torn *apart* by their duty; he specialised in evisceration."¹⁵ With his huge experience of acting in Germany, Harper

¹⁵ Sue Harper, 'Thinking Forwards and Upwards: The British Films of Conrad Veidt', in Richards (ed.) (1998), p. 135.

is surely right to note that he best represents “a dystopian persona riven by contradiction.”¹⁶ While it is true that Powell’s direction of Veidt could have made more of this aspect of his star image, given the constraints of genre (at heart it remains an ‘action’ based genre) and of storyline (inherited by Pressburger and rewritten to expand Hardt’s role for Veidt), she is perhaps unkind to take these lines to represent the film as a whole.¹⁷ Clearly and emphatically they mark a shift in the text, back to a clearly demarcated conflict-based drama. Until this moment Veidt’s Hardt has struggled with just the ambiguity Harper finds to be lacking. It is a typically melodramatic resolution, making the world legible once more, for as Christine Gledhill points out, “melodrama is a drama of misrecognition and clarification, the climax of which is an act of ‘nomination’ in which characters finally declaim their true identities, demanding a public recognition till then thwarted by deliberate deceptions, hidden secrets, binding vows and loyalties.”¹⁸

A final irony, the last vestige of Expressionistic homage in the film, is exhibited in Hardt’s fate. Recognising that his own U-boat is about to torpedo him, he attempts to semaphore the message “Hardt ist Hier” to his old crew. They fire nevertheless and he is destroyed by that with which he most identifies, the German navy. It is a self-destruction, his own double, an uncontrollable extension of himself, turning on him at the moment when he reaffirms his identity and authenticity. But while his death is ironic, Hardt’s cry reasserts his individual ego. This is the narrative’s resolution: having shifted into a paraxial regime where selves were blurred, it now finds and restores the centrality

¹⁶ Harper. p. 123.

¹⁷ The film was made by Korda’s London Films as part of a four-film contract with Columbia, and Pressburger was asked to re-write a heavily dialogue-based and novelistic script adaptation of the original novel. See Powell (1992). pp. 299-306.

¹⁸ Christine Gledhill. ‘Signs of Melodrama’, in Christine Gledhill (ed.) *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (Routledge: London. 1991). p. 211.

and value of the stable personality. Self-consciously, a close-up shows Hardt on the bridge of the steamer, cranking the controls to the “Finished With Engine” position as the narrative itself grinds to its own halt. As he is left alone on the sinking steamer, he quietly expresses the rediscovery of his heroic self by repeating the personal motto of his opening scene: “I never smoke a pipe.” The last shot of the film shows where its dramatic investment has lain, resting not on the romantic reunion between the Blacklocks, but on debris littering the ocean, marking where Hardt has gone down with the St. Magnus.

It is tempting to suggest that in Veidt’s wild signalling from the deck of the St. Magnus we see a glimpse of the acting style expounded by Edward Gordon Craig and detailed in the previous chapter (Section 4.1.3.). Mannered and abrupt - marionette-like - the exaggerated gestures of Veidt’s early film career (which, of course, blossomed before the arrival of synchronised sound) are codified and concretised into Hardt’s futile semaphore. Craig had written that *der Schrie*, the scream of horror and anger, should distinguish the impassioned will of the actor, and he was alert to the tragically ironic potential when that emotional excess was trapped within a regulated clinical language.¹⁹ This is what that semaphore signifies. Vital crisis articulated physically - not with a raw flailing physicality, but struggling within a brutally mechanised sign system. It repeats the irony of Veidt’s furiously articulated cry, “Hardt ist Hier!” as his fists pound his chest: it is a call to his second-in-command, Schuster, aboard his U-boat, and is also an existential assertion, made at the moment of his destruction. This highly melodramatic register is clearly more full-blooded than the body of the film, most of which has been a more prosaically crafted genre piece, albeit one which is enriched by a re-drafting of Romantic motifs. *The Spy in Black*, then, can be conceptualised as a product of a popular,

¹⁹ see Craig, quoted in Michael Patterson. *The Revolution in German Theatre, 1900-1933* (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1981). p. 57.

indigenously British, cultural tradition. This might be termed its ‘dominant’ coding. But an alternative set of codes, dovetailing into that tradition, also claim our attention. They are presented through Vincent Korda’s design (and the industrial practice which produced such tight studio designs), through Pressburger’s narrative which takes the conventions of a genre and plays up the Romantic traits embedded within them to germanicise the film, and through the presence of Veidt, for whom the screenplay was written. The film is most successful when this alternative set of codes are deployed together in the name of gothic sensationalism. If it is only in its last brief moments that Veidt’s potential is fully realised, his presence nevertheless complements a film which betrays the characteristic traits of a 1930s Anglo-German aesthetic.

*

A brief look at Powell and Pressburger’s next film, *Contraband*, shows some of these themes being reworked. Plainly, the repetition of the Veidt/Hobson pairing, and of an espionage theme, links the films, and like *The Spy*, this second collaboration also opens with a concretely signified place and time. Positioning itself at both the geographical frontier of the nation, and at the moment of transition into war, the graphics displayed over location footage establish where we are: “In August 1939, Eastgate on Sea was just a holiday town on the South East coast of England. In November 1939 - ” it commences, and the sequence proceeds to show subtitled morse code scripted across the screen regarding the interception of the Danish Freighter *Helvig*. Like Captain Hardt’s semaphore, this language is a mechanical, logical sign system, clearly decipherable. As Pressburger’s narrative proceeds, the protagonists shift once more into a deceptive and confused paraxial space, with partisan loyalties undone early on by Captain Anderson’s (Conrad Veidt’s) political neutrality (he is Danish). The plot line, about military intelligence relating to enemy ships sailing under neutral flags, is weakly thought out, but it perpetuates a motif from the previous film, namely the

distinction between actual national identity and displayed or admitted badges of belonging (it is the weakness of this link between signifier and signified in these films which enables nationality to be so readily masqueraded). Following Mrs. Sorenson (Valerie Hobson) to London in pursuit of his identity papers, Anderson is 'stateless'. While, here, he freely shifts into the noir world of Sorenson's espionage, he remains committed to rationality. The narrative's interest in clocks, schedules and deadlines (putatively a source of suspense) marks this commitment - Anderson's watch, inscribed with his name and playing a Danish sailors' tune, neatly equates the rational with his sense of Danishness and with the navigational skills of his maritime career.

If the structure of *Contraband* repeats much of *The Spy In Black*, a few of its set-piece sequences (all designed by Alfred Junge) stand out as areas of specific interest. The presentation of the 'Three Vikings' Restaurant marks a stage in the assimilative process not dealt with elsewhere in Powell and Pressburger's work. It is an enclave, a safe haven, marking out a sub-cultural affiliation, here of foreigners within Britain. This is an ambiguously separatist strategy: perhaps a transitional stage, preceding a deferred incorporation into the main culture, it is also a defensive policy resulting in an exaggerated sense of belonging to the old country (one of the Danes is even costumed as a Viking!). One of the film's other set-pieces occurs in the Nazi's London base, and it is no arbitrary accident that it is hidden in a cinema. Hitchcock, of course, had used a London film-house, showing popular thrillers and cartoons, to mask Verloc's evil activity in *Sabotage* (acutely suggesting a demonic dark side to the cinematic medium). In *Contraband* we see the cinema audience standing to acknowledge the British National Anthem, oblivious of the truth hidden behind the screen. Tempting as it might be to see this as a metaphoric model for a British cinema permeated by foreign personnel, it is also part of the film's play with appearances and essences. And finally, there was a satirical currency to the film's other camouflage for German infiltration, the

warehouse of “Patriotic Plaster Products”, with its store of Neville Chamberlain busts for which, presumably, there is no longer a market. A joke about the futility of 1930s appeasement, with the then Prime Minister relegated to history, Chamberlain is at least redeemed when his plaster bust is used to fell Van Dyne, the film’s German villain (“They always said he was tough,” jokes Anderson).²⁰

But it is in its marked Expressionist sequence that the film underscores its German roots most visibly. Unlike the sustained atmosphere of *The Spy in Black*, this hallucinatory moment, when Anderson is knocked unconscious, is injected artificially. The images superimposed over a close-up of Veidt’s face to a percussive soundtrack, is very much a stylistic eccentricity. In what must be a deliberate acknowledgement of one of German cinema’s most celebrated director’s, the instigator of this extreme moment in the narrative is the female German agent, whose name is ‘Lang’ (names are played with in this sequence: Anderson reveals his Christian name to be Hans; and Lang’s German thugs joke that they must therefore be “the Brothers Grimm”). Like Sammy Rice’s gigantic whisky bottle in *The Small Back Room* (a film which claims its place within any canon of British noir), Anderson’s hallucinations advertise the production team’s technical skill and have a narrative justification - they mark a crisis of identity as Anderson tries to persuade his captors that he is “not Mr. Pidgeon” - but alone such techniques are little more than curiosities. Tim Bergfelder dismisses the importance of such expressively psychological effects in British cinema: “Most Continental art directors adhered in their British period to a ‘classical’ organisation of space, ... and most of the rare aberrations from these principles can be explained as ‘highlighting’

²⁰ *Contraband* had its trade screening on 20th March, 1940, and was released in the U.K. in mid May. In the intervening period, Germany had occupied Denmark (on 9th April) and the ensuing revolt against Chamberlain led to his resignation as Prime Minister on 10th May, on which day Hitler invaded the Netherlands and Belgium. The Danish community in the film, and the Chamberlain joke, could not have been more topical. Michael Powell would later recall that Chamberlain “was already the laughing stock of the Nazis and of his own people” when the film was released. See Tony Williams, ‘Michael Powell’, *Films and Filming*, no.326, November 1981, p. 12.

markers for isolated dramatic effect. But this does not amount to a German aesthetic.”²¹ He is correct to say so, but the evidence for a ‘German aesthetic’ is not limited to such isolated tableaux - the argument for a more sustained Germanic influence elsewhere is a strong one, and in *The Spy in Black* it is incorporated into the very form of the film.

*

4.2.2: Anton Walbrook

It is 1948, and this is probably the most startling moment in Anton Walbrook’s British film career: he emerges from behind a lowered theatre curtain, crossing a boundary to expose himself to the accusing gaze of a playhouse spotlight (and the judgement of society). Impeccably dressed, shuddering with erupting mania, he shrieks the management’s formal announcement that “Miss Page is unable to dance tonight.” The characters he played were often be so bedevilled. Walbrook’s brittle features - the upright body, the elegant manners, the thin upper lip (usually hidden beneath an unfeasibly precise moustache) - these mark a patina of civilised control threatened with disintegration when confronted with incursions of the irrational. In this film - Powell and Pressburger’s *The Red Shoes* (1948) - the role is that of Boris Lermontov, the autocratic impresario for whom ballet is “a religion”. This hideously ironic final sequence embodies much that is characteristic of the Walbrook persona. Here, Lermontov is confronted by the consequences of his rejection of ‘human feelings’. His protégée Miss ‘Page’ (a *tabula rasa* on whom both Lermontov and her husband Julian Craster

²¹ Tim Bergfelder, ‘The Production Designer and the *Gesamtkunstwerk*: German Film Technicians in the British Film Industry’, in Andrew Higson (ed.), *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema* (Cassell: London, 1996), 36.

have striven to inscribe their wills), has leapt to her death, unable to broker any reconciliation between social conformity and the artistic absolutism he demands. The last shot of Lermontov sees him in the shadows of his private box, isolated and mortified as 'The Red Shoes' ballet is performed, with keen pathos, *sans* its prima ballerina. The whole sequence is emblematic of an actor whose fractured image incarnates the recurring tensions in British cinema of the 'forties between realism and excess, restraint and abandon.

Walbrook personifies Powell and Pressburger's interest in the foreign. I therefore wish to explore the significance of his performances for them, placed in the context both of his other work in Britain and of his early career on the Continent. The writing which scholars have so far produced examining German input into British cinema has tended to focus upon technical aspects - particularly design and camerawork - this being the most obvious area of expertise to be transported to this country in the inter-war years.²² Performance has been given scant attention.

Powell and Pressburger collaborated with Walbrook on four films in total: the 'war' films *49th Parallel* and *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*; the gothic romance *The Red Shoes* and *Oh...Rosalinda!!*, their updated version of *Die Fledermaus*. Each draws on distinct aspects of Walbrook's persona, but whenever he appears his 'foreignness' is the common denominator, and the British response to it is a commentary upon the nation's indigenous tastes and prejudices. In the wartime films, his foreign nationality is something to be accommodated. This is, of course, what happens in *Colonel Blimp*. It is a policy set to test the inclusive aspirations of popular wartime allied rhetoric. Elsewhere, his foreignness is romanticised -

²² see Sue Harper, 'Interview with Maurice Carter', in Sue Aspinall and Robert Murphy (eds), *Gainsborough Melodrama: BFI Dossier 18* (BFI: London, 1983); Kevin Gough-Yates, 'The British Feature Film as a European Concern: Britain and the Émigré Film-Maker, 1933-45', in Günther Berghaus (ed.) *Theatre and Film in Exile: German Artists in Britain, 1933-1945* (Berg Publishers: Oxford, 1989); Bergfelder (1996); and Tim Bergfelder, 'Surface and Distraction: Style and Genre at Gainsborough in the Late 1920s and 1930s', in Pam Cook (ed.), *Gainsborough Pictures* (Cassell: London: 1997).

celebrating his continental charm and sophistication. This is particularly so in Brian Desmond Hurst's *Dangerous Moonlight* (1941); and to some degree it is present in *The Red Shoes*, inasmuch as Lermontov performs the function of a 'matinée idol' (it also characterises his role in *Oh...Rosalinda!!*). But in a more gothic vein, this same exoticism is demonised, giving the actor scope to vent his always present but generally veiled tendency towards hysteria. It is this mode which *The Red Shoes* moves towards. Like *The Spy in Black*, this film is a re-write, although this time of an earlier Pressburger script, and like *The Spy* it weds a generic discourse - here, back-stage drama with love triangle - to a highly Romantic narrative, shedding the accumulated social detail of Pressburger's first script and moving towards a quasi-Expressionistic or more full-blooded spiritual conflict.

An examination of Walbrook's career dramatises how a germanic aesthetic was received in Britain. His background was on the German stage. Born in Vienna in 1900, by the age of sixteen he was playing minor roles on stage for Max Reinhardt, with whom he had trained.²³ By the time of his first film, the circus picture *Salto Mortale* (dir. E.A. Dupont, Germany, 1931), he had proved his versatility in over two hundred stage productions in Berlin, Munich and Dresden (in works by writers including Wilde, Shaw and Shakespeare).²⁴ Among his early film successes, the 1933 hit musical comedy *Viktor und Viktoria* (dir. Reinhold Schünzel, Germany) was notable for its frivolous exploration of gender and sexuality. Set primarily in London's theatre world (and thus foregrounding issues of performativity and masquerade) its premise, echoing *As You Like It*, is that a struggling female singer (Renate

²³ Some accounts give his birth date as 19th November 1896.

²⁴ Some doubt exists as to Walbrook's film debut: most accounts, including his own published in interviews, cite *Salto Mortale* in 1931. However, Nicholas Thomas (ed.) has his debut as *Mater Dolorosa* (1922) (See Nicholas Thomas, (ed.), *International Dictionary of Films & Filmmakers*, (St. James Press: Detroit, 1992)). Nevertheless, it was with 'talkies' that Walbrook began to make any real impact.

Müller) poses as a male drag-artist, 'Herr Viktoria', in order to advance her career; Walbrook, secretly aware of Suzanne's deception, plays her suitor.

The film is ripe for modern queer readings, and Walbrook's portrayal of the romantic hero involved with the contingently re-gendered protagonist (in a semblance of a gay romance) might well now be decoded with the hindsight of Walbrook's own homosexuality. In the 'thirties, his image in Britain had been established as having "a feint aura of reserve," and it was noted that "unlike many actors, he will not open his heart to any casual acquaintance."²⁵ Decades later, Michael Powell acknowledges Walbrook's sexual orientation, but reaffirms his "enigmatic and elegant" persona.²⁶ The mystique of the romantic star is thus handsomely peddled, with the intrusive public gaze conveniently deflected from Walbrook's home life.²⁷ There is a clear temptation to meld biography with performance and naïvely to over-read the catastrophically splintered, narcissistic or haunted roles which Walbrook would later play as somehow expressing a warped aspect of this 'hidden' identity, something fuelled by the genuinely gay sub-text to *The Red Shoes*.²⁸ Such roles recall earlier work, such as his German remake of *The Student of Prague* (Arthur Robison, 1935), a Faustian tale of a student who sells his reflection and is tormented by his doppelganger. An escape from the light-hearted froth of his musical comedy and romantic appearances, Walbrook regarded this as his favourite

²⁵ Margaret Burrows, 'Vienna's Idol Follows in Ivor Novello's Footsteps: The Story of Three Lives', *Film Pictorial*, 14/8/37, p. 12. All references to contemporary interviews, reviews etc., relating to Walbrook may be consulted on the B.F.I. Library micro-file 'Anton Walbrook'.

²⁶ Michael Powell (1992), p. 639.

²⁷ As recently as 1989, David Shipman euphemistically narrates a sadly anonymous domestic drama with the tired remark that "(Walbrook's) friend of some years standing killed himself shortly after his death" (my emphasis). See David Shipman, *The Great Movie Stars, Volume One: The Golden Years* (Macdonald: London, 2nd edition, 1989), p. 595.

²⁸ The Vicky/Lermontov relationship is often seen as an heterosexual codification of that between Nijinsky and Diaghilev, and Powell concedes that Walbrook's performance is "filled with passion, integrity and, yes, with homosexuality" (Michael Powell, *Million-Dollar Movie*, (Mandarin: London, 1993), p. 279. As a marker of the gay appropriation of *The Red Shoes*, Mike Nichol's recent film *Birdcage* (1996) has its camp drag star Albert, hysterically repeating Walbrook's "Miss Victoria Page will not dance tonight!" in its opening sequence.

role from his pre-war European career.²⁹ In any event, the ‘submerged’ fact of Walbrook’s sexuality is complicated by enigmatic reports in 1938 of his engagement to an eighteen year old actress, Maud Courtney (a marriage ‘indefinitely postponed’ because of Miss Courtney’s age, because of her mother’s disapproval, and because he was still an Austrian citizen).³⁰

With the hugely popular romantic comedy *Maskerade* (Willi Forst, Austria, 1934) Walbrook made his name.³¹ The film familiarised ‘specialised’ British audiences to him,³² and according to one typical review, “his elegant, humorous and completely charming portrait of the philanderer made him just about the most popular member of the select group of Continental actors who are internationalists among screen artists.”³³ Fanzines would later invoke this performance when marketing him here as “a light comedian.”³⁴ On the strength of these lighter roles, Walbrook’s image made an easy transition into British culture. He was a touch of exotic class, and the flurry of publicity devoted to his arrival here in 1937 championed his European status as “a great romantic star.”³⁵ His name change, however, suggests a partial or ambiguous assimilation: just before arriving he changed his name from Adolf Wohlbrück, distancing himself from his roots, clearly, but adopting what remains the *semi*-English and more romantic Anton Walbrook.³⁶ Moreover, despite the

²⁹ Burrows, p. 12.

³⁰ See two unlabelled news cuttings (dated 24/10/38 & 24/11/38) on the B. F. I. microfile on Walbrook.

³¹ To *Picturegoer Weekly* (3/8/35) the film was “an outstanding feature”, and Adolf Wohlbrück “excellent”.

³² Burrows, p. 12.

³³ Leonard Wallace, ‘Meet Anton Walbrook’, *Film Weekly*, Vol. 19 no. 460, 7/8/37, p. 14.

³⁴ Tom Dysart, ‘Anton Walbrook’, *Film Weekly*, Vol. 19 no. 480, 25/1/37, p. 21. For Dysart, Walbrook is “something between a William Powell and a Robert Montgomery,” and he notes that William Powell replaced Walbrook when *Maskerade* was re-made by M.G.M. as *Escapade* (dir. Robert Z. Leonard, 1935).

³⁵ Tom Burdon, ‘Welcome to Walbrook’, *Picturegoer*, Vol. 7 no. 345, 1/1/38, p. 17.

³⁶ The name change came during Walbrook’s brief spell in Hollywood, explicitly to romanticise his image, although obviously the rejection of his first name is particularly loaded in the political context of the 1930s.

rejection of the Austrian name, his voice ensured that his foreign status remained unavoidably central to his image. His acquisition of English - clearly a vital factor now that sound cinema had fully established itself - was the focus of much media attention. Magazines reported Walbrook's admission that he "would never attempt to play an English role."³⁷ His accent would therefore determine the parts he would play. By 1940, a desire to be "more English than the English" is noted and he regrets that he feels unable to act his beloved Shakespeare: "Ever since I came here I've tried to lose my accent, but I've still got it, you see!" he sighs in one interview.³⁸ Again, however, there are hints that his assimilation remained intentionally ambiguous, as his efforts to retain his characteristic accent is noted. He "very deliberately preserved the soft Viennese accent. Shrewdly he believes that a trace of accent appeals to English-speaking audiences."³⁹ Kevin Gough-Yates quotes another contemporary account about his voice-coach: "When (Walbrook) came to Denham, to play opposite Anna Neagle in the Victorian pictures, he sent for a teacher, who while in Vienna had given him his first English lesson ... She has, in fact, been chiefly responsible for Anton's English developing into a most charming aspect of his screen personality."⁴⁰ Whether a canny ploy or not, the accent remained, and it is the dominant expression of his 'otherness'. Always eloquent, Walbrook's voice is a subtly modulated and rhythmical tenor, tightening in moments of urgency into a guttural rasp - a flicker of a barely submerged hysteria which could break loose in his more histrionic roles.

³⁷ Max Green, 'Acting is in his Blood', *Picturegoer*, Vol. 7 no.331, 25/9/37, p. 17.

³⁸ Sylvia Terry-Smith, *Picturegoer*, 27/4/40, p. 11.

³⁹ Lotte Eisner suggests that German 'talkies' favoured Austrian actors too, where their "softer speech" were more congenial than harsher German voices. See Eisner, p. 312.

⁴⁰ Gough-Yates, p. 154.

Of all of his personal traits, it is Walbrook's "charming aspect" which is most frequently commented upon (and by the time of *Dangerous Moonlight*, as the film's hero, Stefan, he himself could be heard joking self-referentially about his "continental charm"). To be charming or fascinating is not simply to possess the passive qualities of desirability or attractiveness. It is a double edged characteristic. It is also to cast a spell, to bewitch, subdue or captivate: an expression of power. Both meanings of the word are contained within his persona, but it seems the less troubling aspect was the most memorable. "Remember the Warsaw Concerto," prompts the title of Walbrook's obituary in the *Daily Express* in 1967, noting that he "became the idol of millions after his performance as the airman-pianist in ... *Dangerous Moonlight*" (implying also that after a relatively unproductive last decade, the star had been outshone by Richard Addinsell's hugely popular, gushingly Rachmaninovian score for that film).⁴¹ To the *Daily Telegraph* Walbrook was "an actor of great charm" who "made his name in this country in Herbert Wilcox's film *Victoria the Great*,"⁴² while the *Daily Mail* considered him "one of the last of the romantics" and noted his "devastating effect on female hearts."⁴³

Despite the 'matinée idol' status (established as much on the West End stage as on film), only rarely in British films is Walbrook cast as a genuinely romantic lover, with his understated performance as Stefan in *Dangerous Moonlight* being the apotheosis of this more engaging side. Here, Walbrook's charisma is conflated with undimmed Polish national consciousness, with the determination to defeat Hitlerism, and with the universalised human aspirations suggested by Stefan's musicianship (as a concert pianist struggling with his sense of duty to fight for his homeland). Walbrook emphasises his more inviting traits (and

⁴¹ *Daily Express*, 16/8/67.

⁴² *Daily Telegraph*, 10/8/67.

⁴³ *Daily Mail*, 16/8/67.

downplays his voice's harsher register), placing himself as an emotional vehicle to carry the film's ideological mission (something which is predictably distilled into the tear-jerkingly climactic reunion between Stefan and his wife).

More often, however, Walbrook is used to exemplify the process of assimilation into Britain. While it is impossible to divorce this from Emeric Pressburger's own autobiography, it was as Prince Albert in Herbert Wilcox's *Victoria the Great* (1937) and *Sixty Glorious Years* (1938) that he first acted out the migrant experience. While Wilcox clearly works within a set of heritage/biopic generic conventions, Victoria and Albert's relationship is nevertheless still the stuff of romance. The Walbrook 'charm' is still in operation. But these films demonstrate a conflict between that undeniable charm and a tightly defined nationalist rhetoric. The depiction of the inhospitable welcome meted out to Albert thus reads immediately as an inauspicious castigation of British insularity (particularly in *Sixty Glorious Years*, which is metaphorically imbued with the immediacies of 1930s European politics). Stricken with bad weather on his journey here, Albert jokes that England is "a country that's so difficult to get to," and on his arrival he battles against a hostile British Establishment. Anticipating Theo in *Colonel Blimp*, he nostalgically finds a sense of 'home' in the recognition of similarities between the British countryside and his native Germany, although his vigorous efforts to assimilate himself are doomed to failure. Hence the distracted paranoia of his dying words in *Victoria the Great*: "Don't leave me! They are waiting for me at the Tower. I've done my best." Only where Walbrook plays an *alter ego* for the devoutly anglophile Pressburger (as in *Blimp*) does he fit snugly into the textual rendition of England. There, as elsewhere, Pressburger allows England to be an island refuge, one which for him was not psychologically 'difficult to get to', where for all its faults of woolly-mindedness and backward-thinking, Theo can at least be welcomed as a friend.

If in *The Spy in Black* Veidt has little room to amplify his undeniable presence, Pressburger would later offer Walbrook keynote monologues and set pieces (illustrating how much weight his voice would carry). As Peter, the leader of the German Hutterite group in *49th Parallel*, Walbrook's 'big speech' is one of the cornerstones of the film. Unlike Prince Albert, Peter represents a community which has found in Canada its ideal sanctuary. He is the spokesperson for a space which is the antithesis of Nazism, and confronting the German Nazi invaders of his refuge he strenuously denies any kinship with them. "We are not your brothers" he declares, "Our Germany is dead!" Peter's disavowal of a simple national identity is expanded in *Colonel Blimp*, where again it is Walbrook's rhetoric which forms the emotional and ideological crux of the film.

As I have detailed in Chapter 3.1, the aged Theo's tribunal testimony, where he pleads for asylum in Britain, illustrates how far the rhetoric of wartime allied consensus is endorsed. When he mentions the Nazis, Walbrook's tired, gentle voice rises to a barely strangled growl, a naked expression of his hostility to Hitlerism. That growl is suggestive of a tendency towards darkness, something which had already been capitalised upon in *The Rat* (Jack Raymond, 1937). Considerable press focus had been given to this 'talkie' remake of Ivor Novello's silent film (Graham Cutts, 1925), and indeed comparisons to Novello would echo throughout Walbrook's career.⁴⁴ In this re-make, Walbrook's 'Rat' (a Parisian jewel thief) lacks Novello's playful swagger. While both Walbrook and Novello appear as attractively cavalier objects of erotic fantasy, Walbrook possesses a degree of cool disdain, tempered only by moments of provocative flirtation (performative signs cannot be directly compared, of course, as Novello employs codes of physical gestures which are inherent to the semiotics of silent

⁴⁴ Burrows, p. 12. The stage musical *Call Me Madam* was similarly publicised ("some of the old-time Ivor Novello matinee-magic is back in show business": *Daily Express*, 13/8/52).

film). Walbrook is a loner, less sympathetic at first, although his reserve does soften. His 'Rat' suggests a misanthropic sense of alienation which is genuinely Romantic.

We may trace the alienated misanthropy to the German stage and the classic 'art' cinema which drew from it (just as the light charm of Walbrook's split persona belongs to his career in popular musical comedy). The darker strain is also apparent in Walbrook's British work with Thorold Dickinson, the superior melodramas *Gaslight* (1940), and *Queen of Spades* (1949), and also, of course, in *The Red Shoes*. Given the proximity between his roles in these films and the German tradition, it is worthwhile recalling again the influence of Edward Gordon Craig. He fervidly rejected bourgeois realism. His concept of the 'Über-marionette' invoked a non-naturalistic ideal of acting, expressing an abandonment of civilised restraint, and the naked scream ('der Schrie') would be the marker of this abandonment. Veidt's finale in *The Spy in Black* is a progenitor of Walbrook's similar outbursts. Crossing the Channel, however, gives such abandon a new meaning.

As *The Times* perceptively noted, Walbrook "had not attempted on beginning to work in England to change his style radically, but he judiciously toned it down, while slyly drawing attention to its individuality at moments."⁴⁵ This restraint dovetails into the lauded stiff-upper-lip which is so synecdochal of English middle-class manhood and which would feed the understatement which characterised the dominant realistic aesthetic of the 'forties cinema. Re-contextualised into England, Walbrook's 'moments' of individuality strike violently at such values and can render him monstrous. They critique the very codes of Englishness which the Walbrook persona would nominally seem to embrace, and as such are self-reflexively ambiguous (this combination of critique and fascination echoes the twin discourses which I have suggested figure in *A Canterbury Tale*, see Chapter 3.2).

⁴⁵ *The Times*, 10/8/67.

Wedded into neither the mannerisms of the West End stage nor the trend towards cinematic realism, his ‘moments’ are forced under pressure and become explosive. The schism between Walbrook’s ‘well-mannered’ persona and his innate hysteria marks out those characteristics which proved unassimilable within British middle-class culture. His foreignness paraded, he reminds us of boundaries, of border-crossings: a peripheral figure with all the schizoid tendencies which belonging to the margins can produce, while the very act of making him monstrous highlights the limits of that indigenous culture.

Louis Bauer in *Gaslight*, Hermann in *Queen of Spades*, and Lermontov are all double-identities, spirits tortured with obsessions and facing disintegration. They echo Walbrook’s gothically haunted *Student of Prague* pursued by his liberated mirror-image. Bauer, returning to the site of his crime to seek the jewels he has once murdered for, is now masked with a new identity. He delineates crucial fractures between respectability and vulgarity, sanity and madness, and Walbrook’s fights to contain these incompatible energies. Descended from the Victorian stage, Bauer is irredeemably wicked. And as George Turner has noted, *Gaslight* significantly de-anglicises him: a Teutonic villain being thought “desirable” during wartime, the original stage-play’s ‘Manningham’ is here renamed Bauer (and is coded as a “queer” foreigner).⁴⁶ The name change suggests a paranoid tendency to cast ‘otherness’ nationalistically.

When vexed by his wife there is the hint of a twitch about Bauer’s upper lip, ominously suggestive of insanity and of his vulnerability to atavistic regression. His monstrosity, of course, is linked to the mystery of his background, and it is his wife’s suspicion about his real identity which most jeopardises her. Secrets are integral to these Walbrook roles. They signify a resistance to the shared ethos of 1940s “communal” British cinema (such as that which

⁴⁶ George Turner. ‘Gaslight’. *American Cinematographer*. Vol. 76 no.12. December 1995, p. 93.

typifies Ealing), and they mark his difference (hence, layers of identity are concealed, just as Adolf Wohlbrück is kept buried by the good manners of Anton). A tense dénouement here sees Bauer physically bound to a chair, deranged by the realisation that his wife has all along been in possession of the jewels he has lusted for. The ropes which now forcibly harness him supplant the psychic control which has abandoned him and serve as a visual expression of society's coercive power.

Walbrook's performance in *The Queen of Spades* (another historical drama) reinforces the traits displayed in *Gaslight*. An impoverished Russian soldier fixates on an ancient Countess's devilish secret for winning at cards. Insinuating his way to her via her ward Lizaveta, he terrifies the Countess to death before he can extract the key to her secret, although her spirit later divulges the mysteries of her Faustian pact with the proviso that he marry her ward. But rejected by Lizaveta, he risks his earnings on a game of cards. The Fates cheat him of his fortune and he is left ridiculed, penniless and insane. Dickinson's highly stylised mise-en-scène sustains an atmosphere of theatrical excess, while the focus on role-playing and artifice reinforces the film's strident lack of realism. As with *Gaslight*, Walbrook's monstrosity is enacted on a fantastic stage - here not only displaced into the early nineteenth century but also to Russia. Seething with class resentment and material ambition, wary of his mirrored reflection, and presented throughout as an unsympathetic victim of his obsession, Walbrook is again a monster ("It was like looking into the eyes of Satan," Lizaveta confesses, and in an effective montage, a close-up of Walbrook writing masqueraded love-letters pans to a spider's web on his desk, dissolves to a grotesquely extreme close-up of the spider, and then superimposes this image onto Lizaveta's pillow as she sleeps alongside it). While the film proved too

exotic for some reviewers,⁴⁷ one particularly commended Walbrook's "two screams."⁴⁸ These 'shock horror' moments, as Walbrook confronts the dead Countess, echo the primitive shrieks of Craig's German theatre.

This brings us back to his address to the theatre audience which concludes *The Red Shoes*. An undeniably startling moment, it is Walbrook's homage to the German stage, with Powell and Pressburger stamping their own cosmopolitan credentials as they had done almost a decade earlier with Conrad Veidt. Just as those films acknowledge Veidt's background, specific allusion is made in *The Red Shoes* to Walbrook's *The Student of Prague*, the film which marked his departure from light comedy and musicals in the 'thirties. Having renounced Vicky Page because of her love for Julian Craster, Lermontov is found alone in his darkened room (vampirically, he is often in shadows). His fingers twitch nervously; he punches his fist into the palm of his hand; and grunting with fury he approaches his mirrored reflection and smashes his fist through the glass (*The Student of Prague* concludes with Walbrook shooting the reflection which has become his pursuing 'other'). Lermontov's partial collapse at this stage anticipates his final ruin. Svengali-like, he tempts Vicky back to the ballet. As the final sequence approaches, Lermontov coaxes Vicky to "put on the red shoes": his arm behind her, she sits on his knee, a ventriloquist and his dummy (and throughout the film, he has insisted to his protégé that he "will do the talking"). Unable to find expression within marriage or within Lermontov's system, Vicky hysterically erases herself from the film by leaping to her death.

⁴⁷ The *Evening Standard* (17/3/49) found it "a little too harassed and melodramatic"; the *Daily Express* (18/3/49) "a gloomy film"; while *The Observer* (20/3/49) thought it "overstylishly brought to the screen". The *Sunday Graphic*'s reviewer (20/3/49) noted Walbrook's "particularly hysterical performance" but conceded reluctantly that hysteria is "exactly what the part requires."

⁴⁸ *Sunday Chronicle*, 20/3/49.

It is at this stage that a drastic inversion takes place. Lermontov's system collapses; the all-seeing impresario becomes the object of the gaze, on-stage, transfixed by the theatre spotlight. The lighting here itself admits an Expressionist heritage: as Lotte Eisner's points out, the use of chiaroscuro on the German stage to isolate one character is "the visual translation of the Expressionist axiom stipulating that a sole object chosen from the chaos of the universe was to be singled out and plucked from its links with other objects"⁴⁹ (it could from this be speculated that the separation of the strongly lit protagonist from the 'chorus', and the intense focus on the individual which this led to, helped facilitate the development of the German stage's marked star system). In his "Afterword to the Actor" suffixed to his tragedy *Die Verführung* in 1916, the German playwright Paul Kornfeld advocated a particular method of acting (a style which loftily repeats the hopes of Edward Gordon Craig). The actor should "dare to spread his arms out wide and with a sense of soaring speak as he has never spoken before in his life ... Let him not be ashamed that he is acting, let him not deny the theatre ... Let him abstract from the attributes of reality and be nothing but the representative of thought, feeling or Fate."⁵⁰ This is the wild abandon Walbrook aims for here. Devastated by Vicky's death, Lermontov becomes a figure of naked rage, every part the ecstatic "hero". As Powell memorably recalls: "he was going to play the scene like a marionette, like the husk of the cool, confidant, polished individual we had known ... his voice ... bleached, mechanical, like that of a ventriloquist's dummy."⁵¹ He adds that the crew of the film were nevertheless astonished at the electrified screech ripped from him, "like an animal trapped in agony." Walbrook forms words, but they do not come trippingly upon the tongue. His voice's tone is the primeval, dehumanised howl of a tortured

⁴⁹ Eisner, p. 47.

⁵⁰ quoted in Patterson, p. 79.

⁵¹ Powell, (1992), p. 639.

human spirit. Tumultuous, impassioned, yet mannered and abrupt, it embodies Craig's struggle between control and anarchy, between the stifling confinement of the flesh and the abstract passion of the spirit, a battle between the icy formality of Pressburger's words and the emotional/spiritual crisis they mask.

Dynamics of inclusion and exclusion characterise much of Walbrook's British film career. A figure of the margins, he is either semi-incorporated, romantically exoticised, or fearfully demonised. But a further important point must be made. In a sense with *The Red Shoes* Walbrook *necessarily* remains outside the narrative itself. Cast as an apparently godlike father-figure (and an *essence* of art) he transcends mundane reality. He is here the *alter ego* of the auteur, in its most stridently heroic guise. While in *Blimp* he simply reflects Pressburger's experience as an alien in wartime, here his role is more formally innovative: with the "Ballet Lermontov" a metaphor for 'The Archers' production company, Walbrook's persona is Powell's self-reflexive comment upon his own film-making process. Walbrook's mannered intelligence, his remoteness and his seductive power render him admirable and/or intimidating: he is rarely a figure with whom we might readily warmly identify. As such he is well suited to this role. As the key device structuring the story of *The Red Shoes*, he embodies authorial confidence and willed-for authorial omnipotence: a projection into the work of Powell's own Romantic obsession with cinema. Messianically artistic protagonists are a motif in Powell's work from Culpeper in *A Canterbury Tale* to Mark in *Peeping Tom* and Bradley Morahan in *Age of Consent* (1969). Lermontov's concluding on-stage speech is also an address directly to the cinema audience (while the spotlight fixing him to the theatre curtain reminds us of the directed beam over our heads from the projector behind us). He is formally lifted from the world of the film and assumes meta-narrative proportions. This super-human quality characterises Walbrook's last significant role as the protean compère guiding the proceedings in Max Ophüls *La Ronde* (France, 1950). Another puppet-master, he is again the

director's substitute (in one blatantly meta-cinematic moment, Walbrook is shown literally slicing out excerpts from the film we are watching). Transcending the signifying system of the film, he hovers above the embedded narrative(s) with customary well-attired charm. He remains free, bound only to an artistic heritage of romantic idealism, of impossible dreams and high-vaulting ambition. As he introduces his nameless 'character' to Ophuls' camera: "Am I the author? The compère? The passer-by? I am you, any one of you. The incarnation of your desire - your desire *to know everything*."

Antonia Lant has noted that "The loss of nationality, ... the masquerade of nationality, ... and the difficulties of being alien but not enemy, of being non-national ... are themes that dominate in Powell and Pressburger's work."⁵² Walbrook embodies this. Both exotic and erotic, welcome and unwelcome, *heimlich* and *Un-heimlich*, much of the tension which he excites is borne out of an ambivalent response to his 'otherness'. Hence his Lermontov is simultaneously damned and praised as an "attractive brute", and is admired and despised as a "gifted cruel monster".



⁵² Antonia Lant, *Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Audiences*, (Princeton University Press: Oxford, 1991), p. 197.

5: POST-WAR MELODRAMA

Introduction

The historical context

Having looked, in the previous section, at some of the ways in which the apparently clear cut parameters of 'British National Cinema' are over-ridden by international factors especially up to the 1930s (a pattern perpetuated by the presence of Anton Walbrook in British cinema through until the post-war period), it is now necessary to focus more concretely on the late forties to contextualise Powell and Pressburger's work in that period. I see that period as being dominated by their Technicolor melodramas (*Black Narcissus* (1947), *The Red Shoes* (1948) and then *Gone to Earth* (1950) along with *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1951)). These are vibrant, troubling, erotic works - they stand out in the history of British film for displaying these characteristics so spectacularly. Despite their highly aestheticised appearance, such works can be understood only through an examination of the prevailing discourses of the post-war settlement in Britain and Europe. An assessment of the dynamic effect which the shift to peace-time had on film production is also necessary, and some comparison with other film melodramas of the period is needed to illuminate what is so distinctive about Powell and Pressburger's highly individual style. In Section 5.1, their post-war Technicolor work is examined in some detail (and their status *as* melodramas is discussed). However, I want first to consider these works in the socio-historical cultural context

which bred them, and to look then at what is an intriguingly transitional film, *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946). This film marks the change from the 'war films' to the more overtly melodramatic vein which dominated in the later forties. Military life and romance plot, actuality and fantasy, are juxtaposed. More immediately, though, let us remind ourselves what the state of the nation in the late forties actually was.

There is ripe cause to read the events of 1945 optimistically, with the war's end and the high hopes of a majority Labour government bringing to fruition the ideals of the Welfare State, progress towards which had already been initiated by the war-time National Government. However, as Alex J. Robertson has pointed out (in a volume aptly entitled *The Bleak Midwinter: 1947*) things were not so rosy.¹ The nation's clear sense of identity, forged with such apparent consistency during the war years, suffered with the changeover to peace-time, when historical circumstance failed to live up to the rhetoric of hope and promise which had prevailed for so long. The terms of the debate had altered. Britain saw out 1945 with a colossal balance of payments deficit. With rationing, any pride taken in the allies' victory was contradicted by the spartan material conditions which were set to continue into the early 1950s. Anglo-American relations, bolstered through the war, experienced a tremor in September 1945, when the United States declared the abrupt and unexpected cessation of Lend-Lease, the system whereby Britain had effectively financed her own war effort on cheap American credit. This sudden move was perceived as hostile in Britain, where Lend-Lease had been seen as early happy proof of a 'special relationship' with America, yet the 'special-ness' of that relationship was always more keenly felt by the British than it was by the Americans. Maynard Keynes was able to rectify the immediate economic crisis by securing a low interest loan from America. However, British reconstruction

¹ Alex J. Robertson. *The Bleak Midwinter: 1947* (Manchester University Press: Manchester. 1987).

also depended heavily on U.S. aid provided by the Marshall Plan. Welcome as it was, this aid journeyed across the Atlantic as part of a concerted effort to construct a bulwark against Communist interest in western Europe (the recent enemy, Western Germany, was the third largest beneficiary of American aid after Britain and France). The motivation behind both the loan which Maynard Keynes negotiated and the Marshall Plan was simply to enable the British to continue to buy American products, and in Britain, considerable anxiety existed regarding the debilitating implications of this economic subservience. The growing centrality of the U.S. dollar as a unit of currency on the world's economic stage did little to alleviate Britain's dented self image. India's departure from the Empire reinforced this general current, of course. Britain's reluctance to abandon her position on the global stage lay behind the importance she laid on her relationship with America: it was a wish to pitch herself alongside an unquestionable super-power, and only with the eventual humiliation of Suez did the reality of her new world position begin to impress itself (and even then the national reassessment remained incomplete).

The late forties were, as I have said, a time of considerable hardship. Rationing continued. The weather was dreadful (1947 saw the worst winter on record). If earnings had risen during the war, and if full employment was secured in peace time, there was still little to buy, and much of what was made in the country was produced for export. A sense of dissatisfaction, if not of dashed expectations, was prevalent, for as Alex J. Robertson reveals, so much of day-to-day living remained "some way behind what people remembered fondly as *real* peacetime conditions, before the war. And the discipline which many had been willing to impose on their frustrated propensity to consume was not so easy to accept once the war was over."²

² Robertson. p. 6.

With Britain's slow and painful readjustment to the realities of her actual world status, and genuine hardship at home, the utopianism of the Welfare State could be seen to cushion the deprivations of the late forties. Clearly the establishment of a new education system and of the N.H.S., together with the modernisation promised by nationalisation, addressed problems perceived in the state of the nation. If the provision of social security did not set about a large scale redistribution of wealth, it aimed to provide a safety net to eradicate absolute poverty, and in the system of National Insurance it purported to incorporate the working population into a common pool of shared interest. The war years had, of course, necessitated the abandonment of *laissez faire* politics. As I discussed with reference to *Colonel Blimp*, the dominant ideology of the People's War had aimed to recruit the entire population into a public sphere, and to eradicate the concept of private or individual interest: paradoxically the concept of 'Home' (as a retreat from community) had been put to one side, however much the 'People' were reminded that 'Home' was ultimately what they were fighting to preserve. The Labour Government's commitment to extending the boundaries of the State in the post-war period perpetuated this ethos of public involvement in the life of the individual. The government therefore had to tread carefully as it crossed the boundary into traditional bourgeois-liberal preserves. It continued to call upon public duty. Its anti-libertarianism was cast as a democratic commitment towards an equality of opportunity.

As so often, it was the State's intrusion into the institution of the Family which animated ideological tensions. It would be a commonplace statement to suggest that the War had severely dislocated family life. Conscription, evacuation, changing work patterns and, not least of course, the trauma of injury and loss of life had all worked to fragment once stable familial structures. It would be similarly simplistic to suggest that the post-war period saw the simple re-domestication of British womanhood, although this is an oft-perceived cliché of the period: the mobilised woman,

who had enjoyed the liberating experience of contributing to the war effort by occupying what were hitherto male domains (a stereotype personified by 'Johnny' in *Colonel Blimp*), was, according to this thumbnail historical sketch, subjected to an ideological pressure to return to the home, to her motherly and wifely duties. Why is this sketch misleading? It implies firstly that women had achieved a parity with men in the work place during the war. In fact, debates had raged regarding equal responsibility, status and pay, and the injustices of disparities in the work place had been the cause of some political agitation during the war. The conscription of women took into account, and implicitly prioritised, their roles as mothers (mothers of small children, for example, were exempt from conscription). And also, of course, the shift into full-time paid work - which admittedly many women did find genuinely liberating - was always circumscribed by the stress laid on its temporary nature. It was 'for the duration' (Barbara Caine has argued that the emphasis on the special contingencies of wartime meant that the social upheaval of women's conscription "did not provide a basis for altering the gender order or for transforming social, sexual and familial expectations once the war was over."³).

Certainly at just the time when the State was programmatically intervening into family life at the end of the war, the health of society was seen to depend to a large degree upon good mothering. Anxiety even existed regarding the birth rate, which had fallen dramatically in the early forties. The Royal Commission set up in 1945 to investigate population trends reported that parenthood should be encouraged, and the thrust of its findings suggested that women's problematically increasing engagement in paid employment needed to be addressed. If women's paid working was not actively discouraged - and it needs to be acknowledged that there was never a concerted effort to get women back into the home - the terms of the Report nevertheless sought

³ Barbara Caine. *English Feminism 1780 - 1980* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1997), p. 227.

to re-emphasise their parenting duties (the Commission did not in fact report until 1949, by which time the immediate scare regarding the birth rate had subsided in the wake of the post-war baby boom). It was argued, then, that family stability depended upon full-time mothering. This was the bedrock, the solid foundation, which created the conditions for the sound socialisation of the nation's young (discourse of the mid to late forties, for example, specifically associated a perceived rise in juvenile delinquency with the 'problem' of mothers' working). The 1945 Labour election victory saw a raft of social legislation, and whatever its idealistic ambitions, this enshrined official policy regarding gender relations. Even granted that Beveridge's energies had been spent in solving problems *for* women, as Jane Lewis has pointed out his "conviction that adult women would normally be economically dependent on their husbands became embodied in the post-war social security legislation, which in turn had a prescriptive effect."⁴ Yet when the end of the war returned men to civilian life, women were not, as I have said, simply reallocated domestic duties. It is fairer to say that a genuine ambivalence prevailed regarding gender roles in society: at times blatantly contradictory messages were given out. Official discourse constructed women as wives and/or as mothers. Confusedly, they were also viewed as workers. As Jane Lewis goes on to argue, the situation was a complex, confusing one, for "women found themselves subject to conflicting pressures - both to leave and to stay in the labour market."⁵ Plainly put, official discourse applied double pressure to the female population. It blamed working mothers and at the same time needed their labour.

The problem was economic. Post-war reconstruction depended on expanded production, which required a larger work force. The end of the war had not seen the immediate withdrawal of women from the labour market, and despite any prevailing ideological anxiety regarding

⁴ Jane Lewis, *Women in Britain since 1945* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1992), p. 21.

⁵ Lewis, p. 70.

women's commitment to their natural maternal function, in 1947 the Ministry of Labour was paradoxically forced to call for more women to enter paid employment, for they represented the only significant reserve population to be recruited. In a noteworthy echo of wartime, the rhetoric of 1947 was pitched in terms of segregated jobs (women would not be taking men's work) and the temporariness of the labour shortage was stressed. Again, women were to be called upon in a crisis, this time to help the nation's export drive, and to reduce her national debt. What can, I think, be deduced from these cross-cutting ideological messages is that a genuine cultural resettlement was underway, a resettlement which was fought out with particular energy on the terrain of the traditional family. Tensions and ambivalence, moral panics, set against a more general anxiety regarding the intrusion of the State into the hitherto private regime of the household. It was in this atmosphere that, in Elizabeth Wilson's words, "conflicting and incompatible demands (were) being made upon women. During the late forties and early fifties these problems could still be discussed in moral terms of duty, selfishness, patriotism."⁶ It is not a discourse which readily encompassed ideas such as individual achievement, desire, or the pursuit of pleasure.

The state of the British film industry in the late forties shared in these conflicts and crises, and as will be discussed shortly, the films produced were enmeshed in the same ideological tensions. As always the British cinema's relationship with America crucially impacted on the texts it produced, and (as always) its success depended in part upon macro-economic factors outside its control. Studio space requisitioned during the war was freed up in 1945, and the need for expansion and export (observed across the British economy) was felt acutely within the cinema industry. Rank pursued his ambitious plans to strengthen his foothold in the American market (for

⁶ Elizabeth Wilson, *Only Halfway to Paradise: Women in post-war Britain, 1945 - 1968* (Tavistock Publications: London, 1980), p. 189.

example by purchasing the prestige Winter Gardens Theatre in New York). The most significant event to hit the industry in the late forties, however, arose from the government's urgent policy to address the balance of payments problem, and here the film industry was notably vulnerable, for in the broadest sense the industry was a drain on sterling: as far as distribution and exhibition is concerned, the industry relies heavily on American imports. Britain in the late forties was crippled by its dollar shortage. The last thing the economy needed was the seepage of profits back across the Atlantic, and the government therefore addressed the crisis by discouraging all but the most necessary imports (the choice, as Geoffrey Macnab has written, was between 'Bogart and bacon' - American films or food on the plate⁷). In August 1947, while Rank was personally in America negotiating distribution deals, a massive 75% *ad valorem* tax was imposed on all imported films. Hollywood's reaction was to impose an immediate embargo on all new films, halting exports to the U.K. and effectively denying Rank (and other British producers) access to American screens. The fragile and credit-based nature of the British industry could ill afford such dramatic crises, while Hollywood could well withstand the lack of British distribution and exhibition profits (in any event American re-runs and stockpiled releases already in the U.K. prior to the imposition of the tax meant that British screens did not run out of Hollywood fare until the end of the year). Seeing a gap in the market, Rank strove to expand his own production by stretching his financial investment to the limit, but, as George Perry points out, "paradoxically, with the field, in theory, completely empty of competition, it became harder to make films in England. The reason was simple. Hollywood's retaliatory action had diminished almost to zero the chances of American release, and it was felt that the British domestic market was insufficient to earn adequate returns."⁸

⁷ Geoffrey Macnab, *J. Arthur Rank and the British Film Industry* (Routledge: London, 1993), p. 164.

⁸ George Perry, *The Great British Picture Show: from the 90s to the 70s* (Hart-Davis MacGibbon Ltd.: London, 1974), p. 124.

While the effect of the *ad valorem* tax was dramatic, it at least offered British production what it had long claimed it needed to consolidate a 'British National Cinema': freedom from the Hollywood factor. The reality was that the industry depended upon that Holy Grail of American distribution deals. What this indicates is that the notion of 'national cinema' as a discreet entity lacks substantial meaning in a global economy. Even with protectionism militating against the effects of Hollywood domination, the borders are not closed. National cinema is a critical construct. It is a way of reading. It does not necessarily tally with economic reality.

The import tax was repealed in May 1948. With the British industry over-extended on production, screens here became flooded with a backlog of U.S. releases. British films rushed out during the blockade were faced with a tide of American films with which they could not hope to compete. The quota legislation instigated by the 1948 Cinematograph Act (the ten year spell of the 1938 Act having expired) then raised the exhibitors quota to 45% for first features and 25% for supporting programmes. This further exacerbated Anglo-American trade relations, and put paid to the British industry's attempts to secure access to American screens. Other well meaning legislation, such as the system of government loans made available through the National Film Finance Corporation (Korda took advantage of such funds to produce works such as *The Third Man*) helped shore up the domestic industry. Transatlantic partnerships continued to be forged - notably Korda's deals with both Goldwyn and Selznick. These deals would impact, of course, on Powell and Pressburger's work when they left Independent Producers to return to Korda's fold. Goldwyn's dissatisfaction with *The Elusive Pimpernel* (1950) and Selznick's with *Gone to Earth* each culminated in lawsuits with Korda. The British film industry reeled from the economic crises of the late forties. Vulnerable because of its effective dependence on foreign audiences to recoup production costs, it was always likely that the circumstances of the post-war settlement would impact upon it with disproportionate effect. By the time the British economy had turned round

with the boom period of the fifties, changes in leisure patterns, the rise of television and the diversion of surplus private incomes into the purchase of consumer goods meant that the industry had ceded its central cultural position. The status it achieved during the war would not be recovered. Struggling in the face of legislative moves which can at best be described as quixotic, and veering between over-expansion and near collapse, the British cinema industry of the 1940s was one characterised by both ambition and dashed hope.

Cinema was still a dominant form in the forties (attendance peaked in 1946 at an all-time high of 1635 million visits). Admittedly, part of the problem was that in the main the public chose to watch Hollywood films as an escape, as Geoffrey Macnab has argued, from the austerity of their surroundings, “but by spending money on Hollywood (they) contributed to that austerity.”⁹ But if we look at British production in the immediate post-war period, we find the confused and turbulent social re-negotiations of the time articulated in powerful ways, even if the obvious ‘grand narrative’ of the war effort no longer provided it with its structuring *Ur*-text. Despite the continuing appearance of ‘quality films’ such as Lean’s *Brief Encounter* (1945) and Olivier’s *Hamlet* (1948), as part of a very mixed bag of work produced in the period, we can reasonably assert that the critical construct of a ‘National Cinema’, which had long rested upon notions of ‘quality’, no longer held sway. The ‘quality critics’ may still have employed the discourse which had enjoyed a tight fit with the cinematic realism of the war years, but the actuality of film production now lacked the cohesiveness of that critical discourse, staggering as the industry was from financial crisis, marked as it was with internal dissent, and subjected as it was to slings and arrows of well meaning Treasury and Board of Trade intervention.

⁹ Macnab. p. 174.

British cinema articulated the terms of the war powerfully, and largely fell in line with the censorship requirements of the M.O.I. After August 1945 those production restraints no longer applied. The British cinema continued to produce war stories of course, although they were few in number, while many documentaries contributed to the public discourse of education which assisted the propaganda of national development and reconstruction. Cycles of popular films in the late forties continued to address the cultural conditions of the times: psychological thrillers and crime films (such as the Boulting Brothers' *Brighton Rock* (1947) and Reed's *Odd Man Out* (1947) and *The Third Man* (1949)) tapped into concerns regarding spiv culture, delinquency and criminal opportunism. The noir-ish vein of works such as these needs to be thought through more fully as evidence of a crisis in the construction of masculinity brought about by the trauma of war, by the apparent female emancipation it had ushered in, and by the diminution of Britain's obvious military-Imperial profile. Clearly these lines of inquiry need more space than can be offered here, but they are fruitful avenues for further investigation (the spate of American noir films in the post-war period likewise relates to that culture's anxiety regarding masculine roles).

If we look at what films were produced and which were box-office successes in the late forties, certain trends are discernible (Robert Murphy has offered a useful brief Chronology of the period in his study *Realism and Tinsel: Cinema and Society in Britain 1939 - 1949*).¹⁰ In the immediate post-war years, British films topped box office figures: *The Seventh Veil*, *The Wicked Lady* and *The Courtneys of Curzon Street* were the most successful films exhibited in the U.K. in 1945, 1946 and 1947, while *The Third Man* won in 1949 and *The Blue Lamp* in 1950. However, this masks the truth of the state of the industry. Spiv thrillers, costume pictures and contemporary melodramas do move into a dominant position by 1947-48, and the overall number of domestic

¹⁰ Robert Murphy, *Realism and Tinsel: Cinema and Society in Britain 1939 - 1949* (Routledge: London, 1989, reprinted 1992), pp. 241 - 247.

productions does rise in the wake of the *ad valorem* tax (from around 60 in 1945-47, to 77 in 1948, and by the time the backlog had filtered through to the screens, the number of British films rose to 96 in 1949). But many of these could only be classed as second features. 'Quality' films such as *The Blue Lamp*, *Brief Encounter* and *The Captive Heart* (1946) together with releases such as Powell and Pressburger's *A Matter of Life and Death* and *Black Narcissus* may have done reasonable business, but many other British films by the late forties did badly. American work such as *Meet me In St Louis*, *Duel in the Sun* and *The Jolson Story*, along with 1948's biggest success, Wyler's *The Best Years of our Lives*, continued to do well.

The woman's film (if we take both costume pictures and contemporary melodramas to have a gendered aspect) are prevalent. It is impossible, however, to generalise about the wide range of work being produced. *Brief Encounter* and *The Wicked Lady* stand out as notable productions (they were released in the same month, December 1945) yet could, at face value, hardly be more different. How then do women feature in the films of the period, and where can we find signs of progressiveness in representations of gender relations? The costume melodrama series produced at Gainsborough Studios from 1943 onwards stand as a hugely popular set of works, and taken together they can be seen to capture in allegorised form something of the turbulent Zeitgeist. Compared with so-called quality films such as *Lauder* and Gilliat's *Millions Like Us* (1943), which charts the wartime recruitment of women into factory work realistically and movingly, but which views its female protagonists primarily in terms of duty and chastity, the Gainsborough bodice-rippers are remarkably forthright and reckless in their animation of female desire. Pitched at female audiences such popular films presumably tap into the real needs or desires of that half of the population. Commencing in 1943 with *The Man in Grey*, through the unusually contemporary *Love Story* (1944) to *Madonna of the Seven Moons* (1944) and *The Wicked Lady*, Gainsborough ladies are characterised by dynamism, the pursuit of individual desire,

and a strength of character. The nominal shift into an historical time setting makes no claim to authenticity. Indeed Lady Barbara, the eponymous wicked lady played by Margaret Lockwood, inches towards the territory of the pantomime dame at times (despite Lockwood's charms), complete with bitchy asides to the camera which make the viewing audience complicit in both her disdain for the dull feudal duties of her daily life, and in the enjoyments of her devious, criminal and sexual nocturnal alter-ego. Cross-dressing to switch into a highwayman's outfit she is also a principal boy, continuing the camp, pantomime feel of the film, and while the manly attire can be read as a critique of the passivity and subservience culturally associated with the outward show of femininity, Barbara's status as a heterosexual woman is never allowed to be forgotten. To this end, James Mason, her highwayman lover is cast undeniably as an object of desire - tales of his criminal activity are the topic of excited female gossip in the film. This diegeticised survey of female desire marks the Mason character, and the scenario of the pistol-wielding robbery, as a clear female fantasy. Richly elaborate and highly feminine costumery is also the stuff of fantasy - the contrast with the utilitarianism of 1940s female fashion is obvious. What Gainsborough offers, then, is escapism for the mass market. The studio's famous logo - a portrait of a painted Gainsborough lady nodding slyly to the audience - invites us into a playground version of history. The frame of the portrait signifies the parenthetical nature of that playground: it marks off the world of these films from reality.

This is not to say, of course, that contemporary issues are not addressed in films such as *The Wicked Lady* (divorce, adultery, female ambition, motherhood: recurring themes such as these play out some of the prevailing ideological tensions of the period). As to the progressiveness of the films, it has to be admitted that the deviating heroines are marked by hysterical neuroses and are ultimately punished for their transgressions (notably in *Madonna of the Seven Moons* where Phyllis Calvert literally plays a woman suffering from split personality, one a chaste respectable

wife and mother, the other an unrestrained gypsy fleeing to Florence to cavort with Stewart Granger till she meets her death). Barbara's changes of costume in *The Wicked Lady* can also be seen as an index of instability. However much they are punished, heroines such as these - even the notably evil and self-serving Barbara - capture audience attention more than the demurely moral and middle-class characters against whom they rebel. And in each of these films, there is a romance plot, imbued with sufficient signs of genuine feeling to carry audience sympathy too. All this suggests that, until the appointment of the more conservative Sydney Box as Head of Production at Gainsborough in late 1946 (after which female desire in the studio's work tended to be repressed and a more realistic tone came to dominate) the major output of the studio endorsed an ethos of *carpe diem*. This contradicted the call to duty which characterised national discourse during wartime. The studio's shift to a greater conservatism by 1947 (noted, for example, by Sue Harper¹¹) marries with the atmosphere of the period, inasmuch as female ambition was reined in (or at least re-channelled) by official doctrine encouraging motherhood and domestic duties. However, as I have said, this ideological doctrine competed with urgent economic calls for women to leave home and take part in paid work, and the genuine schism to be detected here in the ideology of the time works its way through to the more crudely polarised split-heroines and black-and-white morality of the Gainsborough storylines.

It could be said that stark divisions and invidious choices are to be found in other, more realistic films of the period. Even from Ealing, that creative cottage industry of quality and restraint, came a work such as Robert Hamer's *It Always Rains on Sunday* (1947), which presents the contemporary East End of London with considerable and impressive realism. Here, the heroine Rose Sandigate, played by Googie Withers, is torn between wifely duties (she is married

¹¹ Sue Harper. 'From *Holiday Camp* to High Camp: Women in British Feature Films, 1945 - 1951' in Andrew Higson, ed., *Dissolving Views* (Cassell: London, 1996), p. 104.

to the plump and decidedly un-dashing George) and the greater excitement or danger to be had when Tom Swann, an old lover returns. He is found lurking broodily in the shadows of their Anderson shelter, a relic of wartime. Perhaps this is a significant place for him to hide, his presence there connoting a nostalgia for the illicit sexual pleasures of the war and the blackout (seized pleasures which Gainsborough had celebrated, even if only in allegorical or metaphorical form). Perhaps the most significant other British melodrama of the period is Lean's *Brief Encounter*. Again, this work deals with female desire, and it might be argued that as its heroine almost commits adultery (before a chance disturbance sends her fleeing guiltily from the scene of her near-crime) the film displays considerable daring in its representation of sexual temptation. However, the overall impression the film creates is one of restraint. This is not to say that the film argues for the renunciation of pleasure. Its heroine's frigidity and sense of entrapment are clear, and the film both delineates and aestheticises the tensions and agonies which are excited by Laura's potential crossing of moral boundaries.

What is curious about *Brief Encounter* is that it erases wartime altogether. It is in effect a 'period' film - set in the 1930s when Noel Coward's source play was first penned, back in the 'real' peace-time conditions which were so far from the lived experience of the immediate post-war years. However, the date of the setting is never made clear in the film (incidentally it is also blind to geography, shifting seamlessly from a Home Counties urban locale, which strongly articulates the film's middle-class Englishness, to an undisguised Carnforth Station, and to some obviously Pennine countryside speaking a Romantic grandeur which is in reality some hundreds of miles away from Laura's Thursday shopping trips). The implicit temporal shift back to the thirties spirits away the privations of rationing. Chocolate is for sale, as is brandy at pre-war prices. If the Pennines and the chocolate are muted fantasies, demurely shifting the film from an immediate contemporary realism, then what this shift also facilitates is a reactionary curtailment of feminine desire. Laura

Jesson's romantic/sexual aspirations are stifled as though any of the emancipatory benefits of wartime mobilisation had never happened. And, significantly given the prevailing concern at the end of the war regarding the birth rate and the role of mothering, it is as much Laura's maternal function which is seen to be neglected by her extra-marital flirtation with Alex. As she idles a Thursday afternoon away with her quasi-lover, it is the sight of children playing in a park which pricks her conscience (or rather she confesses her surprise at not feeling guilty at this reminder of her family home-life), and when her son suffers a minor injury during one of her Thursday absences, the notion of maternal neglect is implicit. I would argue, then, that the film's immediately decodable message is conservative. Certainly in 1945, far more people were tempted to watch Lockwood's and Mason's horseback adventures than to see Johnson and Howard in Kardoma café. The painful irony of *Brief Encounter* may now be more apparent, and the disparity between its musical score and Laura's inhibitions more obvious (the succeeding chapter returns to the role of music in *Brief Encounter* to contrast it with the soundtrack of *Black Narcissus*). But these are modern negotiated readings: the work's dominant meanings are reactionary. It incorporates scenes of fantasy which ally it with the more committedly fabulous regime of *The Wicked Lady*. Yet its broader commitment to suburban realism and to the reality of Laura's passivity causes it to dismiss these desires as nothing more than childish, foolish fantasies.

The notion of competing discourses is integral to melodrama, because the form deals with ideological conflict, with the failure to construct an over-riding, persuasive, all-embracing discourse. The choice between duty and pleasure - one of the key dilemmas which melodrama examines - might well seem particularly fitting in the context of the late forties. If the prevailing official ethos of the wartime period had tried to relegate pleasure in favour of duty, the immediate threat of armed conflict could no longer be used to perpetuate those values. This period is marked more by frustration and dashed expectations. Such frustrations related to the failure of the government to create a utopia for

its victorious subjects; to the conflicting messages regarding women's role in society; and as I mentioned earlier to an unfulfilled desire to make material purchases, a weariness with shortages in the shops. Such deprivation explains the appeal of period melodramas, with their extravagant sets and costumes. It explains the appeal of the lushness of Technicolor. And it explains the marketability of sensational stories such as those being told by Gainsborough. The psychological and topographical extremes of *Black Narcissus* would provide a similar escape. Indeed the film which Laura and Alex are too embarrassed to sit through in *Brief Encounter*, a sensational Korda-esque piece of exotica called *Flames of Desire*, might also belong to this popular entertainment, and their disdain for it marks a cleavage in notions of culture which was (and is) prevalent in the cinema industry. The Gainsborough fare, and the fictional *Flames of Desire* are mass culture: critical objection to such works is the product of elitism. What characterises some of Powell and Pressburger's work of the period is its heterogeneous cultural profile: there is visual spectacle and passion in their melodramas: there is also a persistently middle-brow ethos. Along with the relatively big budget expended on works such as *Black Narcissus*, and Powell and Pressburger's consciously artistic temperament, this ethos sets their work some distance from the more purely commercial Gainsborough product. However, together with *The Red Shoes* and *Gone to Earth* it delineates female desire more erotically than British cinema was wont to do. It constructs a fantasy world and departs from the realistic, but does so with more conviction than Gainsborough. This is because Powell and Pressburger's work belongs to a more solidly Romantic aesthetic where illusion is intensified to imaginative or sublime effect. While clearly Powell and Pressburger's work is enmeshed in the culture of the 1940s, some of their post-war work does take on a more 'artistic' guise and commits itself to formal experimentation. An openness to non-indigenous ideas of art is to be found in their experimental use of sound and colour. Avant-garde modernism in British cinema was never the sole preserve of the documentary tradition, and Powell and Pressburger's audio-visual innovations, and heady use of Technicolor, celebrate and push the

boundaries of the cinematic apparatus just as energetically as the 'art-house' product overseen by John Grierson and Cavalcanti. Whether or not that technological ambition is put to the service of an ideological progressiveness is however open to question. These are some of the socio-historical and aesthetic issues which the following chapter sets out to examine. However, I shall conclude this introduction with a brief look at Powell and Pressburger's 1946 release, *A Matter of Life and Death*. Part of the nation's war-story, yet released after 1945, dealing with a military hero yet seeing him as a poet and a lover, the work is a hybrid. It lacks the female hysteria of the later melodramas (indeed its hero is arguably hysterical). Like the later works however, and conforming to a motif often central to the melodramatic form, it pitches fantasy against reality as competing discourses. It also, of course, has a propaganda function, and clearly belongs to the zeitgeist of the mid forties.

A Transitional Text: *A Matter of Life and Death*

A Matter of Life and Death is in many ways Powell and Pressburger's most spectacular work: audacious in design, conceptually ambitious and dramatically idiosyncratic, to say the least. Its culturally prestigious position can be ascertained from the fact that it was selected for the first Royal Command Film Performance at the deluxe MGM Empire Cinema in Leicester Square on 1st November 1946. There is something of a time-lag about the work, released over a year after the end of the war, yet set back in that period. Not many films represented the war at this time (even Asquith's celebrated R.A.F. film *Way to the Stars* (1946) opens with footage of a deserted air-strip, and becomes an elegy in flashback to the heroic deeds once performed there). Three years after *A Matter of Life and Death*, *The Small Back Room* was released. It is also set in the war, and throughout British culture the repercussions of the conflict would continue to be played out (the series of Ealing comedies, for example, perpetuate the wartime communal myth). It is notable that Powell and Pressburger would return to war stories later in their careers, with *The*

Battle of the River Plate (1956), *Ill Met By Moonlight* and Powell's *The Queen's Guards* (1961).

This can be seen as a nostalgic gesture, and significantly, what they revive is not the all-in-this-together communality of 'classic wartime cinema'. They, along with other films of the 1950s such as *The Cruel Sea* (Dir. Charles Frend, 1952) and *I Was Monty's Double* (Dir. John Guillermin, 1958) exhume the officer class. *The Queen's Guards*, in particular, seems to return to the world of Korda's imperial epics of the 1930s, particularly *The Four Feathers*, dealing with the re-masculinisation of its protagonist, a young army officer oppressed both by a domineering father-figure and the memory of an elder brother killed heroically in action. Coming to terms with (or fantastically denying) Britain's post-war situation, these genre war-films are reactionary exercises reinstating the prowess of the British male, and none is entirely successful. Something of that ideological mission can be seen in *A Matter of Life and Death*.

There is a practical reason for the timing of *A Matter of Life and Death*'s release. It had originally been devised earlier in the war as a propaganda piece to bolster Anglo-American popular relations, and clearly the romance plot between Peter and June still succeeds in doing this. During the war, and up until its closing stages, the American presence in Britain was not universally popular. This was what the film sought to redress. Arriving on screen in late 1946, as the chill of the Cold War was beginning to bite, its meaning had shifted. Sue Harper and Vincent Porter's re-publication of a Soviet review of the film pinpoints precisely how the effect of propaganda can deviate from its intent.¹² As they report, the Soviet critic viewed the film as a desperate and hostile attempt to yoke British interests to the U.S.A., and to propagandise the establishment of an Anglo-American power-bloc. The official British response is one of denial: the Russian critic has misread the film disastrously. Harper and Porter suggest that the foreign policy of the Labour government

¹² Sue Harper and Vincent Porter. 'A Matter of Life and Death' - The view from Moscow', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 9, no. 2, 1989.

was committed to maintaining good relations with the Soviet Union, while also remaining cosy to the U.S.A., and that the release of the film at this time put their bipartisan approach in jeopardy.¹³ This is a perceptive comment. Yet the economic conditions of the late forties had, as I have said, clearly exhibited Britain's reliance on credit and aid from the States: this dent in the national pride is massaged by the love-plot of *A Matter of Life and Death*. Significantly, the trans-Atlantic romance here is between an English *man* and an American *girl* (contradicting that cliché of the war in which an oversexed, overpaid, 'over here' G.I. claims imperial and sexual authority over a demure English land girl). British masculine pride is thus bolstered. What is more, the film's hero is elite, educated and drenched in Western (notably English) culture. A personification and upholder of the canon, as long as he recovers from his injuries it is safe in his hands.

This connotation of national pride with the nation's literary elite is deeply conservative, of course. Raleigh, Marvell, Shakespeare, Bunyan, Byron: all are alluded to, and Peter is their descendent. He is a poet as well as a soldier (like Raleigh, and Sir Phillip Sydney, for example), and thus represents the best of his race. Dr. Reeves in fact pays him the significant compliment, "I like your *English*." As with *A Canterbury Tale*, this is a film in love with English literature, particularly of the Renaissance. An amateur production of *Midsummer Nights Dream* in the film seems to evoke that same pagan-magic quality. A portrait of a Renaissance lady - strongly resembling Queen Elizabeth, dominates the room in which the play's rehearsal is taking place: a reminder of the courtly, chivalric ideals which Peter has inherited.

A few words should be said about Peter's famous declaration of his political sympathy, "Conservative by instinct, Labour by experience". The election of the majority Labour government in 1945 was no radical gesture. Indeed the consensus politics it stood for arose from

¹³ Harper and Porter. p. 181.

the wartime coalition, and while the social legislation passed in the mid to late forties may well have been our small revolution, the structure of society remained intact. Just as Clive Candy is educated to participate in a new hegemonic structure (hegemonic structures are nothing if not assiduous in their powers of assimilation), so does Peter identify with the aims of the post-war government. He is knitted into a new egalitarian social formation, which can at least claim, in its universality, to endorse the sense of social coherence once associated with One Nation Toryism.

The film's politics are delicately and carefully charted, balancing faith in English culture with an openness to foreigners (a characteristic Powell and Pressburger stance). In the court case which brings the film to a resolution, the American Abraham Farlan is a negative power, to be educated - the shooting script describes him as having "a blimpish hatred of the English."¹⁴ When he and Englishman Reeves confront each other without prejudice, they see each other more humanely, and the direction of this half of the film's discourse, rooted in the reasonableness of the documentary form, finds a happy resolution. National difference is acknowledged. Awkward historical embarrassment is literally spirited away when Farlan's first jury, representing various races victimised or dispossessed in the name of British Imperialism, are exchanged for an identical multi-racial group, this time all of them subsumed as American citizens under the flag of the stars and stripes. The inclusiveness of the American Constitution is thus saluted, just as *Blimp* argued for the inclusiveness of British war time culture (Roger Livesey's roles as archetypes of Englishness - military dimwit and village doctor - bind the films together, of course).

The love which develops between Peter and June, initiated unpromisingly in what we take to be the moment of Peter's inevitable death, also has its national and propagandist dimensions, of course, but it is also special, personal, and "uncommon". Within the narrative structure of the

¹⁴The unpublished shooting script may be consulted at the B.F.I. library in London.

work, this little human drama disturbs a larger universal ‘plot’: the smooth running of the cosmos, and the balancing of the Heavenly accounts. These two regimes are clearly marked out: the earthly pursuits of love, table-tennis, chess and so forth is in Technicolor; the chaste, attic calm of the Other World in monochrome. The narrative of the film derives from the negotiation and the contradiction between these two areas. The dramatic shift in the colour code of the film also forefronts another of the film’s concerns: as so often with Powell and Pressburger, the nature of the cinematic medium itself, and its modes of representation, are put under scrutiny.

“This is a story of two worlds. The one we know, and another world which exists only in the mind of a young airman whose sense and imagination have been violently shaped by war.” With these rolling graphics *A Matter of Life and Death* commences. Animated shots of the universe are shown, not unlike Capra’s stellar opening to *It’s A Wonderful Life*, but (unlike that fantasy world) when a tiny world seems to explode, an extra-diegetic voice here comments that “someone must be messing around with the uranium atom.” It is characteristic of this film that it should collide fantasy with urgent topicality by alluding to Hiroshima, bombed only a year earlier. Although Powell and Pressburger released this film after the war, it heavily relies on British cinematic discourse of the early forties. Its omniscient camera’s eye falls towards England through the mist of the English Channel, the voice-over insisting that this “is a *real* English fog”. It is significant that it should hit upon the island via this strategically vital route, the defence of which had figured so strongly in the war. Descending to earth, the audio-montage mixes morse code, foghorns, radio voices (including Churchill’s), while the voice-over implores us to “Listen to all the noises in the air. Listen. Listen.” The voice-over speaks in a confident documentary style. It is authoritative. I am reminded of the sequence early in *Black Narcissus* where Mr Dean’s voice accompanies documentary-style footage of Mopu: his too is a patriarchal, empirical discourse, although the expressionistic and highly subjective version of Mopu which we come to inhabit departs from the realism he invokes. The tone of *A Matter of Life and Death*

before we are introduced to the diegetic voices of Peter and June is reminiscent of Humphrey Jennings' and Stewart McAllister's short masterpiece *Listen to Britain* (1942), which binds the nation together by taking snatches of B.B.C. broadcasts and knitting them together with images of the country to create a coherent fabric of sound and image. It also nods to *A Canterbury Tale*, which opens with a manuscript map of the Pilgrim's Way - another aerial view of Southern England. As discussed in Chapter 3.2, the shooting script of that film emphasizes to the designer and cameraman that the village of Chillingbourne at night is "awful and mysterious, full of strange shapes, stranger sounds, menacing shadows."¹⁵ This England is yet another version of Prospero's cell, full of noises.

As John Ellis has noted in a detailed and valuable analysis, the clash of cinematic discourses is what structures the film. He goes further to point out that the two discursive dialects employed here are particularly meaningful in the context of British cinema in the mid forties: "*A Matter of Life and Death* begins to disrupt the process of subject positioning by providing more than one point of intelligibility" he argues, "by providing two regimes of coherence for the subject: that of a narrative love-story, and that of a more 'documentary' mode of exposition and explanation."¹⁶ The monochrome *Other World*, with its authority, and its sense of order (located not least in the voice-over which opens the film) endorses a set of values associated with the documentary movement of the war period. The love plot disrupts this order: it is individualistic, and, what is more, it is obviously premised on sexual attraction. While Ellis is undeniably correct to identify these two regimes as alternative modes of address (embodying mind-sets which are synthesised only through the balanced appeal to both reason and justice in the Heavenly court case), it is worth pointing out that in those British feature films which exhibit the influence of the documentary movement, there is often a struggle between

¹⁵ The shooting script may be consulted at the B.F.I. library in London.

¹⁶ John Ellis, 'Watching Death at Work: An Analysis of *A Matter of Life and Death*', in Ian Christie (ed.), *Powell, Pressburger and Others* (Faber and Faber: London, 1978), p. 91.

objective/realistic/social/public aspects and the more individual, melodramatic elements. The social types who people the documentary form need to be fleshed out, individuated and made sites of identification rather than just objects for contemplation. Often this struggles manifests itself in the suspicion that a “love interest” has been artificially injected. Dearden’s *The Captive Heart*, discussed in detail in Chapter 3.2, serves as an example of this although here, despite the consternation of a handful of critics, the two discourses are successfully sutured together. In *A Matter of Life and Death*, Peter is explicitly flagged as an “*uncommon man*” whose rights must always be respected. His distance from the documentary regime (here allegorised as Heaven), with its concern for the common man, is all too clear. And the earth he inhabits is a riot of colour. It is not so gaudy as the colour code in *Black Narcissus*, but the roses we see in *A Matter of Life and Death* still articulate a sensuality lacking in the Other World. It is significant that Conductor 71 famously prefers Earth to Heaven, where “one is starved of Technicolor”. This character, as dandified and decadent as the young General at Mopu, signifies a sexuality which seems out of keeping in the monochrome regime “up there”.

As we might expect, many of the reviews of the time expressed an anxiety regarding the Powell and Pressburger’s departure from realism. Frederic Mullally in *Tribune* praises the visual flair of the film, but judges that “fantasy is meretricious unless used to convey a serious message ... or to reach out for lost or obscured values.”¹⁷ Humphrey Swingler in *Our Time* declared a preference for the “solid native skill” of Asquith, Reed, Launder and Gilliat, the Boulting Brothers Lean and Dickinson.¹⁸ In general, there was an appreciation of the technical flair of the film, but a rejection of its implausible storyline and its flights (or escalator rides) of fancy. Such critics represent an small, elite but influential group, noted for frowning upon the crassness of Hollywood. Ironically, *A Matter of Life and Death*

¹⁷ Frederick Mullally, *Tribune*, 8/11/46. Reviews are collected on the B.F.I. microfiche for *A Matter of Life and Death*.

¹⁸ Humphrey Swingler, *Our Time* December 1946.

is likewise suspicious of the dubious quality of mass American culture: Dr Reeves silences Abraham Farlan during the court case by playing a radio broadcast of American jazz crooning. There is a notable shift here in Powell and Pressburger's attitude, however much the brief sequence is coded as a throwaway joke, for in *Blimp* an American big band sounds had connoted impressive dynamism and the spirit of the times.

What the critical anxiety does alert us to is the very real sense of experimentation. *A Matter of Life and Death* clearly foregrounds issues to do with representation. Special effects, trick shots, the motif of Dr Reeves' camera obscura, repeated and daring point of view shots: all of these disrupt the tidy and passive positioning of the subject. To this degree we can see the work as an ambitious inquisition into the nature of cinema (no less so that *Peeping Tom*, although as I have already argued this meta-cinematic quality is to be found throughout Powell and Pressburger's work).

With Peter's rejection of Heaven., Powell and Pressburger commit themselves to the world of Technicolor. This regime is where love prospers in *A Matter of Life and Death*. In their later works, love is crushed. While it is fair to say that in rejecting the monochrome reason of Heaven the film makers turn their backs finally on the wartime spirit embodied in the documentary form, the utopianism of wartime discourse still finds its way into Peter's and June's romance. The Technicolor world they inhabit is certainly a site of high passion. Powell and Pressburger's subsequent forays into Technicolor are often more melodramatic.

Melodrama nominally sits within the terrain of realism, dealing with the everyday, yet it strains for transcendence for an escape from the quotidian. This is perhaps the critical transition which takes place in Powell and Pressburger's shift into a post-war period: during the war, idealistic values had been sanctioned. Divisive constraints of class and gender had mythically been spirited away, and all of the Utopian values saturated into the closing frames of *A Canterbury Tale* or Clive Candy's final salute to the camera in *Blimp* had been worth living and fighting for. In the post-war melodramas, the striving

is still there, but it is frustrated, diverted and gothicised. The times themselves were marked by dashed hopes, and thus narratives of aspiration are replaced by narratives of blockage. While the theme of motherhood is notably absent from the melodramatic trio of works Powell and Pressburger produced in the late forties, its absence is significant. Indeed the hysteria of the nuns in *Black Narcissus* is in part readable as the result of their denial of sexuality: their care for the children of the General's estate is a substitute mothering (this seems particularly so with Sister Honey). While the substitution does not really argue that genuine maternal roles are what the sisters need, it certainly argues that their overly frigid exclusion of 'the natural' is dangerous. In the light of post-war mixed messages regarding the role of women in society, Vicky's dissatisfaction with marriage and domesticity is particularly telling: the invidious choice she is made to make between career and home life could not have been more apposite. However tragic the consequences, Powell and Pressburger endorse her wish to return to the stage, readable as it is as a commitment more to "Art" than to career. In what seems like a more retrograde move, *Gone to Earth* harks back to a Victorian era, and shows its source novel's roots in crude melodramatic structures. Again, though (and as with Gainsborough's productions), we can read the shift in time allegorically: what the film endorses is Hazel's 'natural' spirit. She is a wild child, innocently sexual, and the shift in time reinvests the rural world she inhabits with pagan magic. All of these narratives have tragic closures, and Chapter 5.1 looks at them as untidy crises of thwarted hope. Examined first for signs of Wagnerian totality or unity (bearing in mind Powell's ambitions for the pre-composed film which are first tested in the closing reel of *Black Narcissus*), these films are then assessed for their multi-discursive nature. Melodrama wrestles with competing discourses, and the 'visual-auditory excess' we witness in these works is the marker of such ideological fragmentation.

The melodramas of the late 1940s chart and document the turbulent reconstruction of womanhood of the period. There may be little direct or lucid social reflection in these films, but they are of their time. *Black Narcissus* is readable as an allegory of the end of Empire, and as a drastic

undoing of the communal aesthetic still riding high at Ealing. Here the group falls apart disastrously. It also documents with neurotic intensity a pattern of gender relations which can be mapped onto the social shifts of the post-war period: a transition from what might loosely be called a time of relative feminine autonomy to one which is impinged upon by men.

While national issues can be read in these work, propaganda itself was no longer an imperative. For Powell and Pressburger, the effect of this was that their characteristic Romantic idealism was no longer poured into the emotional reservoirs of Home and Country. Although the native film industry was fragile, Powell and Pressburger's position within it was, in 1945, enviable. Cinema-going was at a peak. In the space this gave them, the Archers were able to express their transcendental aspirations in other ways, ultimately by reifying 'Art', and by implication, cinema itself. In this sense the melodramatic excess and the expressionistic visual effects are worth our attention as moments of spectacle in their own right. The presentation of 'the spectacular' sets up a range of implications for the relationship between author/producer and spectator/consumer. Chapter 5.1 concludes with an assessment of these implications. The feel of these works is close to Peter's hallucinations: "a series of highly organised hallucinations". No longer are Powell and Pressburger starved of Technicolor.



5.1: The post-war Technicolor melodramas: Synthesis and Fragmentation

"something in the atmosphere that makes everything seem exaggerated." Emeric Pressburger

5.1.1: Pre-Composition & Synaesthesia: Manufacturing Absolutes

At this time, 1946, I was already groping my way towards a composed film, which I only achieved with *The Tales of Hoffmann* in 1951. Owing to my decision not to shoot in India ... I was left free to compose a sound-track which would be an organic whole of dialogue, sound effects, and music, very much in the way that an opera is composed.¹

Thus runs Michael Powell's account of *Black Narcissus*, although in the scope and direction of his ambitions his was not a lone voice. As early as 1929, in a piece entitled 'The Cinema of Tomorrow', Abel Gance had drawn similar musical analogies.² "A great film," he had written, "has to be conceived like a symphony ... in time and a symphony in space", and through the use of synchronised triple-screens, superimpositions and sound (and anticipating both colour and three-dimensional effects) the hopes he had expressed were for the widening of "the field of our spiritual vision ... the creation of visual harmonies, the transporting of the spectator's imagination into a new and sublime world."³ Musicality is used to enhance the status of early film, and as Norman King has argued, the orchestral metaphor is no mere poetic allusion for Gance. As well as insisting that cinema

¹ Michael Powell, *A Life in Movies* (Mandarin: London, 1992), p. 81.

² Gance's piece was first published in *Conférencie*, xxiii, 1929. It is extracted and quoted in Norman King, *Abel Gance* (B.F.I.: London, 1984), p. 72.

³ quoted in King (1984), p. 72.

had to “become a visual orchestra, performing symphonies in time and space”, music for Gance was ultimately “a determinant of the image, providing a basis for tonality, movement within the frame, and cutting between frames.”⁴ There is a clear sympathy between each film-maker’s idealistic drive towards what Gance terms “the aesthetic synthesis that the cinema of tomorrow will achieve ... the great symphony of sound and vision.”⁵

Powell had his own pantheon of cinematic heroes. His memoirs applaud the “spectacle and melodrama” of both Gance and Griffith,⁶ and he recalls a chance meeting with Fritz Lang, an idol ever since he saw the overtly fabulous *Die Nibelungen* (he also acknowledges that Lang’s compassion for the killer in *M* is echoed in his own *Peeping Tom*⁷). The films he champions comply with his own aesthetic principles: the use of unified design (he ranks the art director second only to the author on a scale of creativity⁸); the preference for the visual (and hence an initial suspicion of synchronised sound, which he felt bound cinema more closely to reality); the ambition to create the ‘composed’ film organised around musical principles; the repeated belief in the indivisibility of the arts; and a collaborative working practice which recalled the detailed pre-shooting conferences of Lang and Murnau (discussed in Chapter 4.1). As he himself admits, “I had the German film-makers to guide me and reassure me and lead me finally to *The Red Shoes*, *The Small Back Room* and *The Tales of Hoffmann*.”⁹

⁴ Norman King, ‘The Sound of Silents’, in Richard Abel (ed.) *Silent Film* (The Athlone Press: London, 1996), p. 35.

⁵ quoted in King (1984), p. 75.

⁶ Powell (1992), p. 180.

⁷ Powell (1992), p. 516.

⁸ Powell (1992), p. 343.

⁹ Powell (1992), p. 158.

No great expounder of extended theorisations, Powell's keenness for so-called pre-composition is the nearest he gets to declaring a cinematic creed. The 'composed film' itself has something of a German pedigree. Many of the operas/operettas which Pressburger had worked on at UFA were filmed this way, while Powell mentions having later been intrigued by Friedrich Fehar's *The Robber Symphony* (1937) - a film which was entirely pre-composed.¹⁰ While Powell never saw this work, its relationship between music and film sparked his interest, and being antithetical to customary modes of cinematic realism which prioritise the visual image, its pre-composition satisfied his "subconscious desire to experiment, ... to reverse the order of things."¹¹ Like Powell's enthusiasm for the ill-fated 'Independent Frame' system (a cost-driven mode of production which used extensive story-boarding, mattes, rear-projection, special effects and the 'doubling' of star players wherever possible rather than expensive location shooting¹²), his excitement about the 'composed film' marks a renunciation of what Kevin Macdonald calls "the stifling 'naturalism' prevalent in British films."¹³ Hence, the studio-based production of *Black Narcissus* gave Powell all the creative expressiveness he wanted without the cost restrictions which 'Independent Frame' would have imposed.

¹⁰ See Powell, p. 582. Frederick Fehar, an émigré to England from Germany (and incidentally one of the stars of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*) wrote, directed, composed, orchestrated and conducted *The Robber Symphony*. An experimental work, it was a box office failure. T. M. F. Steen describes the film thus: "Not opera, not symphony, but a film-operetta, a film-fantasy, replete with humour, poetry, sentiment, pathos and delightful music." See Steen, T. M. F., 'The Soundtrack', *Films in Review*, vol. 12 no. 8, October 1961, p. 492.

¹¹ Powell (1992), p. 583.

¹² For a more detailed account of Independent Frame, see Winston Wheeler Dixon, 'The Doubled Image: Montgomery Tully's "Boys in Brown" and the Independent Frame Process', in Winston Wheeler Dixon (ed.), *Re-Viewing British Cinema, 1900 - 1992* (State University of New York Press: Albany, N.Y., 1994), p. 41.

¹³ Kevin Macdonald, *Emeric Pressburger: The Life and Death of a Screenwriter*, (Faber & Faber: London, 1994), p. 270.

Giving priority to an (implicitly) extra-diegetic musical soundtrack, as in the celebrated closing sequence of *Black Narcissus*, re-orders cinema's traditional semiotic hierarchy, but it would be wrong to see it as inherently progressive, technologically or ideologically. The demotion (or relegation) of diegetic speech superficially 'returns' cinema to its silent days, while the maximised cinematic illusionism which pre-composition strives for harks back to a traditional nineteenth century aesthetic founded in the sublime (as Gance was aware), in synaesthesia, and in Romantic notions of unity and totality. With the filming of *The Tales of Hoffmann*, entirely shot to a pre-recorded soundtrack, a freedom of choreography and camera-movement was enjoyed which harked back to the visual fluidity of silent film. Thematically, in its concern with obsession, doubling, reflections, idealised love, and 'Art', the film seeks, in Raymond Durnat's words, "nothing less than to recapture the full blown romantic urge."¹⁴

Approaches to cinema history which impose a unilinear teleology onto it do so inappropriately. As a cultural form, cinema at any one time contains diverse elements, often jostling untidily. The emergence of a classical narrative style into a dominant position was by no means absolute, and active if subordinate or redundant characteristics of previous, alternative cinematic forms inevitably tend to persist. It is clearly wrong to perceive cinematic history in terms of a straightforward evolution, sign-posted by technological 'advancements'. Such an approach, for example in André Bazin's mythological account of the progressive trajectory towards 'total cinema' and the encapsulation of reality, has a dynamic teleological appeal, but empirically makes for bad history. In British cinema, traces of the hybrid cosmopolitanism of the 1930s survive in subsequent decades, despite the prevalence of national imperatives during the war years.

¹⁴ Raymond Durnat. *A Mirror for England: British Movies from Austerity to Affluence* (Faber and Faber: London. 1970). p. 211.

Similarly, the silent film aesthetic in Powell and Pressburger's mature work is the ghost of a previous epoch, and it evokes a concept of cinema which is at loggerheads with the dominant cinematic realism of the 1940s (the legacy of 'primitive' cinema is discussed in Section 5.1.3 with regard to the existence of the purely 'spectacular' in their films.).

While Powell craves the 'organic whole', he is nevertheless initially suspicious of synchronised sound, acknowledging that long sequences in some of his films are "essentially silent" and that in his films "images are everything".¹⁵ At one point he sounds a Luddite note: "You could never take the sound camera seriously, tied down as it was to dialogue, sound effects and music. We never did."¹⁶ Decisively though, it is the reduction of the potential of sound to "talkies" which Powell regrets, and the development of synchronised sound is quickly added to his battery of cinematic components. Much early European cinema, influenced by, and influencing, the avant-garde in other media, had illustrated a distinctly modernist tendency towards formal experimentation, yet it was also marked as the inheritor of popular cultural forms such as the novel, the music-hall, stage melodrama, and the fairground, as well as existing as a scientific innovation. Cinema came to occupy a similar cultural space; it found its narratives in popular fiction; it also offered spectacle. Diverse functions all fed into the emerging industry. Cinema thus developed dialectically, and the Janus-like profile is later evidenced in Powell's work. *Black Narcissus*, *The Red Shoes* and *Gone to Earth* form a cohesive triptych, sharing many characteristics, and despite displaying modernist credentials, each belongs squarely within a melodramatic tradition which derives from the nineteenth century. As such they can themselves be seen as backward-looking phenomena. Indeed, Raymond Durgnat,

¹⁵ Powell (1992). p. 168.

¹⁶ Powell (1992). p. 532.

recalling the Victorian stage, dispiritingly judges *Black Narcissus* (along with *The Elusive Pimpernel* (1950) and *Gone to Earth*) to “represent Powell’s *Lyceum* streak.”¹⁷

Melodrama’s very etymology defines it as a combination of music (‘melos’) and drama, and this suggests that it is inherently a double-voiced narrational mode, recalling the observation already made that melodrama struggles to negotiate the leap from the quotidian to the transcendental and seeks to imbue a discourse of the everyday with a metaphysical significance. It externalises, through music and grandiloquent gesture, emotions which could not otherwise be given vent. Focusing on its dialogic nature, accounts of the form have foregrounded the ways in which it gives voice to ideological contradiction or inconsistency. The potential to lay bare social conflicts has given melodrama a progressive reputation, and this is the impetus behind the feminist and neo-Marxist rediscovery of the Hollywood melodramas from directors such as Sirk, Minnelli and Ray (such tensions are visible in Powell and Pressburger’s melodramas, and are examined in greater detail in Section 5.1.2). Melodrama is a broad ranging term, covering a variety of sub-genres, and often the tone suggested by the Hollywood form has foregrounded home and hearth, female passivity and suffering, the claustrophobia of the literally ‘interior’ space matching the psychological discomfort of the subjective inner world of the central ‘victim’. But there are other melodramas, popular, exciting narratives built around the hyperbole of spectacle, sensation and violent action, and this strain is important when thinking of *Black Narcissus* in particular. Taking their post-war melodramatic trio together, however, the analogies which might most readily be drawn are those of the opera and of the symphony, forms which admittedly pre-date the

¹⁷ Raymond Durnat. ‘Durnat on Powell and Pressburger’, in Ian Christie (ed.), *Powell, Pressburger and Others* (B.F.I. Publishers: London, 1978), p. 70.

Romantic period but which were arguably cultivated most strongly during the nineteenth century.

Opera would come to occupy a central place in Powell and Pressburger's output, with *The Tales of Hoffmann*, *Oh... Rosalinda!!* and Powell's own *Bluebeard's Castle* (West Germany, 1964 - unreleased in Britain). As the quote from Powell at the head of this chapter indicates, the 'composed' sequence in *Black Narcissus* marked a transition on the way towards the unity of *The Tales of Hoffmann*, a work which marks his strongest statement about the unity of the arts. With *The Thief of Bagdad*, it also marks his firmest commitment to cinematic fantasy. *The Tales of Hoffmann*'s visual appearance places it wholly within a regime of the fabulous. Although 'magic' is more properly at work only within Hoffmann's contained tales, the design of the frame narrative is itself coloured with the same fantastical ambiance, and is liable to break out into magic (the choreographed dance-story of Kleinzack, for example, or the final multiple unmasking of Lindorf). Because it exists as sustained fantasy, this work genuinely does mark Powell and Pressburger's most 'unified' achievement. It is also a genuinely international endeavour: the "Made in England" stamp which jokingly marks the last shot of the film is at once an indictment of stylistic parochialism within British cinema, and yet it is also a piece of patriotism. As such it is emblematic of its makers' guarded yet affectionate relationship with the country.

The melodramas are more liminal texts, in that they chart excursions into disturbing, alien territories, and collide an awkwardly heterogeneous mixture of discourses: in parts striving towards unity, elsewhere marked by fragmentation, and throughout studded with surprising moments of spectacle. Where *Hoffmann* is more wholly shaped according to a logic (or *il*-logic) of fantasy, the melodramas more uncannily shift between a more realistic milieu and a disturbed, possible supernatural 'other place'.

This is not to say that elements of the uncanny do not exist in *Hoffmann*, for, of course, the tales revolve around the concept (and Hoffmann's tale *The Sandman* provides Freud with the material of his essay on the subject). But in Powell and Pressburger's film, the 'real' is utterly excluded - only the 'non-diegetic' closing shot of Thomas Beecham exists within our common frame of reference.

The melodramas continue to strive for an ideal, and represent stages in Powell's journey towards an "organic whole". *The Red Shoes*, if taken to dramatise an aesthetic philosophy, betrays the idealist view that art is an instrument through which transcendence may be attained. Wagner's high Romantic view of Art (detailed in Chapter 4.1) is echoed here. In his short story, 'Ein Ende in Paris' ('Death in Paris'), Wagner's idealistic young composer refuses to compromise his integrity and finally starves to death, martyred for his Muse. The artist's dying words are something of a manifesto:

I believe in the Holy Ghost and in the truth of the one and indivisible Art; I believe this Art to be an emanation of God that dwells in the hearts of all enlightened men; I believe that whoever has steeped himself in its holy joy must dedicate himself to it forever and can never deny it; I believe that all men are blessed through Art and it is therefore permissible to die of hunger for its sake.¹⁸

Powell endorses this sentiment. In his memoirs he makes the following comment: "I think that the real reason why *The Red Shoes* was such a success, was that we had all been told for ten years to go out and die for freedom and democracy, for this and for that, and now the war was over, *The Red Shoes* told us to go out and die for art."¹⁹ It seems an overly slick transition from the urgent and traumatic historical realities of the war period, suggesting a glib view of human life. Of course, Powell's comment is a piece of self-

¹⁸ quoted in Geoffrey Skelton, *Wagner in Thought and Practice* (Lime Tree: London, 1991), p.69.

¹⁹ Powell (1992), p. 653.

consciously 'Romantic' rhetoric, a capricious claim, not necessarily to be taken at face value. What is apparent, though, is the ease with which wartime ideals were translatable, within the director's aesthetic realm at least, into artistic aspirations. Thus the mobilised and committed patriotism of the war years (itself, of course, mythologised in utopian promise) is redefined, and its idealistic energy is now channelled into new avenues.

This is not to say that Powell and Pressburger underestimate or ignore the real ground-shifts which the post-war settlement brought to British society. This reorganisation is touched upon in *A Matter of Life and Death*'s implicit engagement with the future of the Anglo-American 'special relationship', while Peter Carter's admission that he is "Conservative by instinct, Labour by experience" expresses in a kernel so much about the understated quasi-revolution of the 1945, a massive shift electorally but deeply qualified as a radical gesture. Similarly, *The Small Back Room* is nominally set during the war, and deals with the latent threat of the undetonated bomb, and with efforts to defuse a new type of German booby-trapped explosive. The time-lag between air-raids and explosions invites a reading which remembers the period of conflict retrospectively. The presentation of Sammy's foot injury, a traumatising after-effect of war, indirectly touches upon the symbolic de-phallicisation of the British fighting man, now de-mobbed, back in civvies and returned to a workplace recently occupied by 'mobilised' women. The film's heroine, Susan, is strong, supportive and positively liberated, but the tortuous sexual relationship Sammy has with her is as tense as the threat of the unexploded bombs. Similarly, the gender issues at stake in the melodramas can be seen as part of the ideological reassessment of the role of women in the immediate post-war years. But on a metaphysical plane at least, the Archers find a fresh repository for their earlier idealism by taking flight into a world more clearly marked as fantasy.

Without wishing to labour too far the echoes between Powell and Wagner, the latter's oft-cited *Gesamtkunstwerk* and his hopes for 'communal art' also marry with Powell's. The communal art of which Wagner speaks is the expression of 'der kunstlerische Mensch' or 'artistic man'. This artistic man, in Wagner's words:

can be wholly satisfied only by the unification of all forms of art in the service of the common artistic endeavour; any fragmentation of his artistic sensibilities limits his freedom, prevents him from being fully that which he is capable of being. The highest form of communal art is drama; it can exist only in its full entirety only if it embraces every variety of art ... only when eye and ear mutually reinforce the impressions each receives, only then is artistic man present in all his completeness.²⁰

As Powell took up the phrase from Kipling, "All art is one, man - one!"²¹ There are two points in need of illustration here: the formal aversion to fragmentation expressed in sympathetic appeals to various senses; and the demeanour of 'artistic man' himself.

Lermontov confides to Lady Nestor that, to him, dance "is a religion". Excitedly, he tells Vicky that what he had detected when he saw her dancing at the Mercury Theatre for Madame Rambert was "ecstasy". In the world of ballet he maintains that "human nature" can be ignored. These three statements are related. As the embodiment of a certain view of art, what Lermontov expresses is indeed in the spirit of Wagner - a longing for transcendence. He, Lermontov, is art's high priest and Vicky its ecstatic votary. This spiritual dimension is expressed in the narrative, yet it is placed alongside a very conscious

²⁰ Quoted by Peter Vergo, 'The Origins of Expressionism and the Notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*', in Shulamith Behr et al (eds), *Expressionism Reassessed* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1993), p. 12.

²¹ See Section 2 of this thesis for the original context from which the phrase is taken. It is from Kipling's *Rewards and Fairies* (MacMillan: London, 1955), p.66, and is the motto of the second volume of Powell's autobiography.

treatment of the *material* nature of art through detailed attention to the back-stage rehearsal period. The preparation for the ballet of 'The Red Shoes' is a paradigm of collaboration (obviously a metacinematic parallel is intended between the Ballet Lermontov and the Archers production company). Choreographer, composer, designer, dancers, musicians: all have their participation appreciated, and all are overseen by the impresario Lermontov. Links between the ballet company and the Archers are underscored in the film's opening credits, which are a graphic prolepsis of Lermontov's collaborative ideal. Charting in typical fashion the work done by the film's artists and technicians, the penultimate plate announces "The Entire Production Written, Produced and Directed by." Powell and Pressburger's all-encompassing credit and the unusual stress on the 'entirety' of the production mirror the sense of totality and perfection which Lermontov craves.

The same collaborative enterprise is to be witnessed in *The Tales of Hoffmann*, of course. As Bruce Babington and Peter Evans have pointed out, in that film Powell and Pressburger are "determined to translate 'mere' opera into cinematic-operatic-balletic *Gesamtkunstwerk*".²² Their comments echo Ian Christie's observation that with *The Tales of Hoffmann*, "'all art is one' in Kipling's phrase ... (and that) here, the graphic fantasy of Disney and Eisenstein's notion of 'synaesthesia' join forces."²³ The operatic score is 'widened' to embrace ballet. Stella, in the 'framing' narrative, is an opera singer in the Offenbach text; here she is a prima ballerina, played by Moira Shearer. The presence of Massine, Helpmann and Ashton, and the inclusion of dance sequences, makes dynamic what might otherwise be static operatic arias. It is notable that Robert Rounseville

²² Bruce Babington and Peter Evans, 'Matters of Life and Death in Powell and Pressburger's *The Tales of Hoffmann*', in Jeremy Hambling (ed.), *A Night at the Opera* (Libbey: London, 1994), p. 152.

²³ Ian Christie, *Arrows of Desire: The Films of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger* (Faber and Faber: London), p. 8.

(playing Hoffmann) and Anne Ayars (playing Antonia) are the only two cast members miming to their own voices. Babington and Evans note that this endows these characters with “an integrity of voice and image” which the others lack.²⁴ This is a meaningful strategy given the duplicity and disguise which marks the world of Hoffmann’s tales: only the author and his most idealised love are granted ‘authentic’ vocal expression. Apart from these characters’ voices, not all of the singing in the film is even lip-synched. This is particularly so during the more energetic dance sequences, where the parallel existence of ‘voice-over’ singing and dancing forcibly impresses itself. The two regimes corroborate each other, however, and the result is more one of unity than of a Brechtian separation of ingredients.

It is important here to discuss the differences between the Archers’ two chief designers, Alfred Junge and Hein Heckroth. Controlled design is clearly vital to Powell’s lauded ‘total’ and collaborative regime. Famously Alfred Junge worked with Powell and Pressburger up to (and including) *Black Narcissus*, and for his work on this production he was awarded an Oscar. Heckroth worked on costumes for *Black Narcissus* and thereafter became the Archer’s regular designer, making his mark with *The Red Shoes* and continuing in the same vein as *The Red Shoes* ballet sequence with *The Tales of Hoffmann* and *Bluebeard’s Castle* (notably, though, he did not work on the more realistic, and location-based works, *Battle of the River Plate* and *Ill Met by Moonlight*). Why the shift to Heckroth? After all, as Powell records in his memoirs, he regarded Junge, in 1947, as “the best film designer who had ever lived.”²⁵ Part of the explanation lies in the fresh direction the Archers’ work was taking in the late ’forties. Junge had trained as an

²⁴ Babington and Evans, p. 159.

²⁵ Michael Powell, *Million Dollar Movie* (Mandarin: London, 1993), p.315.

architect. His best work with Powell and Pressburger - the sets for *Colonel Blimp* and *Black Narcissus* betray this background. They have a solidity which is in keeping with the spirit of those works. Compared to the operas, they are realistic: certainly there is an uncanny element in *Black Narcissus* (as befits the gothic strain in the film); and certainly *Blimp* has its romantic elements. Yet it is necessary for the Palace of Mopu to have a stubborn physical presence: it is an environment which is immune to the ideals of the Sisterhood of St Faith. Similarly, the Bathers Club and Candy's home in *Blimp* are the solid accretions of the past: they represent tradition - nothing short of a German bomb can disrupt Cadogan Place. The design element of these works is physical and tangible - expressive yes, as in the Paul Nash pastiches of the World War One sequence in *Blimp* (discussed in Section 3.1.4 of this thesis), but still broadly realistic. None of Junge's work for the Archers could be termed an insubstantial pageant.

As is evident from 'The Red Shoes' ballet sequence and from *The Tales of Hoffmann*, Heckroth aimed for anti-realistic fantasy. When Powell worked more towards his ideal of the 'composed film' he had to dispense with the talents of Junge, and engage with the more freely imaginative Heckroth. Explaining this decision, Powell recalls Junge's hesitant reaction to his suggestions regarding the Ballet of The Red Shoes: rejecting Junge's response that he was going "too far", the director "set about looking for a new designer who would tell (him he) didn't want to go far enough, and found him in Hein Heckroth. (Heckroth) was not an architect, but a painter, a man of the theatre."²⁶

Junge too had worked extensively in theatre in Germany, so this alone does not distinguish or explain Heckroth's particular style (it is also only fair to mention that Junge's work on the closing sequence of Paul Leni's *Waxworks* suggests that he too was

²⁶Powell (1993), p.315.

more than capable of delicate and free-flowing designs - shots in the closing moments of that film, as Jack the Ripper pursues his victim through a demonic fairground setting, strongly recall Vicky's surreal dance in *The Red Shoes*). Powell is right, though, to point to Heckroth's painterly skills. A glance at some of the sets he threw together economically, quickly and effectively for Powell immediately betrays the difference from the bulk of Junge's output. There is a fluidity to Heckroth's work - the use of transparent painted flats and lighting, married with Cardiff's mobile camera to create a shifting, delicate world which entirely befits the subjective points of view (Vicky's, Hoffmann's, Judit's and Bluebeard's). Of course, what is so significant about this fluidity is that it "gestures" to a rhythmic sense of space, rather than a realistic one ("establishes" would be too strong a word, for this is too ephemeral a *mise-en-scène*). Heckroth's sets counterpoint the music, and the music, in these 'composed films', is paramount. The clear theatrical influence here is Adolphe Appia (see Section 4.1.3 on the German stage). This has been noted elsewhere: Appia's biographer Richard C. Beecham, argues that Appia was the inspiration for Heckroth's stage work in Germany²⁷, while Léon Barsacq singles out Edward Craig, Appia and Heckroth as "defenders of the movement ... against realism in the theater."²⁸ It is arguable how much of this style can be thought of as strictly 'Germanic' of course. Appia was, after all, French-Swiss. However, he devoted his work to the staging of Wagner; and, like Edward Craig, had a huge impact on Reinhardt. With his ambitions regarding 'art film' it is particularly apt that Powell, at this stage in his career, strengthened his collaboration with Heckroth. Heckroth had worked with the

²⁷ Richard C. Beecham, *Adolphe Appia: Artist and Visionary of the Modern Theatre* (Harwood Academic Publishers: Reading, 1994), p. 247.

²⁸ Léon Barsacq, *Caligari's Cabinet and Other Illusions: A History of Film Design* (Littel, Brown & Co.: Boston, 1970), p. 95.

experimental and forward-thinking Kurt Joos Ballet company. He displayed the influence of Picasso (so much so that he turned down an opportunity from Hollywood to design the ballet *The Three Cornered Hat* because the great artist had already famously done so²⁹). It can be argued that Heckroth is the decisive factor determining the look of Powell's 'composed' films.

Certainly, *The Tales of Hoffmann* owes much to him. Original plans to shoot part of the film on location were abandoned when the possibilities (and economies) of a studio shoot were recognised. Heckroth had designed numerous productions of the work before, for the German stage, and it is his *mise-en-scene* which is largely responsible for the 'magic' tone of the film. Translucent flats, painted with abstract designs, wafting fabrics, gauzes which appear transparent or opaque according to how they are lit: simple devices such as these play with the viewer's vision. As Raymond Durnat has observed, in a piece which is otherwise largely dismissive of Powell's and Heckroth's "total disdain of plausibility" there is "an effective simplicity (here)... - drifting pieces of sad, sickly cellophane suggesting gaiety's futility".³⁰ Gelled green filters on the camera lens during Stella's opening dance make her shimmer and ripple. Unexpected camera angles trick our eyes: for example, a patterned sheet rolled out on the studio floor during Olympia's dance is transformed by a high angle long shot into a magic winding staircase for her to spiral down. In a film about the deceptive nature of appearances, this is all too apt. As if to emphasise our susceptibility to deceptive appearances surprisingly few of the tricks in the film are created by post-production techniques. The integrity of the space before the camera is maintained. Many of the shots during the ballet sequences are surprisingly long-

³² Powell (1993), p. 319.

³⁰ Raymond Durnat, 'Durnat on Powell and Pressburger', in Ian Christie (ed.) *Powell, Pressburger and Others* (B.F.I. London, 1978), p. 69.

takes. Moira Shearer had been irritated by the need to repeat her dance steps many times for the camera in the ballet of *The Red Shoes*. In part she was persuaded to return to film for *Hoffmann* with the promise that she would not have to do so again, and certainly quick-cutting is generally avoided in the latter film. In the early sequence in which she dances as Stella, the average duration of each shot is a relatively ponderous 14.3 seconds. The shots are almost as long in *Olympia*'s main dance during the first of the 'contained tales', while one of the shots during the brief 'Kleinzack' dance sequence in which she is paired with Frederick Ashton lasts as long as 54 seconds. The objection could be made that a reliance on long takes and on mise en scene makes the film 'uncinematic': however, the visual trickery, and the mobile camera-work restores a balance. The fact that the entire film was all shot to a pre-recorded soundtrack of course enabled the Technicolor camera to be moved freely (noise on set no longer being a factor): this was one of the benefits which silent film had enjoyed. Max Ophuls is noted for the musical fluidity of his mobile camera: his, though, is a patterned, decorative camera movement. In *Hoffmann* there is a graceful quality to the movement, although it is not so tightly choreographed as Ophuls'. It loosely follows the flow of the music, and explores Heckroth's sets, repeatedly revealing new perspectives (sympathising, in effect, with Hoffmann's romantically deluded narratives).

Music is powerfully romantic in *The Red Shoes* too, and it claims to be the 'highest of the arts'. In the opening sequence of that film, a dispute reigns between Julian and his college friends, who are at Covent Garden "not to see anybody (but) to *hear*", and the balletomane couple next to them, to whom Professor Palmer's music is insignificant. Later, Julian expects 'The Red Shoes' to offer a more genuinely synaesthetic experience, anticipating that the imaginative auditor will 'see' a ballroom at his music's prompting.

Ultimately, his music is granted transformative powers, able to metamorphose Vicky “into a flower swaying in the wind, a cloud drifting in the sky, a white bird flying”: all romantic-transcendent symbols, of course. Throughout the film, though, a tension exists between realistically celebrating the expertise of artists, and Romantically appealing to trans-human attributes: Lermontov is called a “magician” (and he has supernatural connotations) but he admits that magic is a mere trick, and that the rabbit must be in the hat for the magician to pull it out.

What of the ‘artistic man’ so idealised by Wagner? The ambiguity of the title of Powell’s autobiography, *A Life in Movies*, suggests that its author’s very existence is a cinematic one, while the “bourgeois/romantic creed” identified in Powell and Pressburger’s work by Geoffrey MacNab corroborates in part the cult of personality which Powell is happy to cultivate.³¹ The messianic idealists and artists which assert themselves in Powell’s films, from David Barr (the Leslie Banks character in *Red Ensign* (1934)) to Bradley Morahan (James Mason) in *Age of Consent* (1969), cannot easily be separated from the ‘Powell’ image with which they are intentionally merged. However much credit Powell gives to designers, cameramen, choreographers, actors, and technical assistants, in his enthusiasm he avariciously incorporates their contribution into a grandiose perception of himself as Orchestrator: “The camera and its crew are no longer that bunch of people out there, but an extension of my own eyes and arms and head. We are rolling!”³² The aspiration, and the longing for satisfaction, signified in Wagner’s “artistic man” is part of the persona Powell constructs, and is mirrored in characters such

³¹ Geoffrey MacNab, *J. Arthur Rank and the British Film Industry* (Routledge: London, 1993), p. 94.

³² Powell (1992), p. 549.

as Lermontov. The quasi-magical aura, and exotic sense of enigma, which cloaks Lermontov is all part of that metaphysical Wagnerian craving. Powell's appearances in his own films corroborate this self-conscious fascination with the aesthetic personality. I have said that the motif of the authoritarian overreacher figured strongly as an expression of authorial anxiety in the Gothic excesses of early German counter-cinema, and in Powell and Pressburger the interest in tyranny mirrors the narratives of these earlier Continental films. The impression to be gained, however, is that the uneasy relationship between filmmaker and cinema which seemed to trouble the German artists is here often translated into a less complicated mesmerisation with the 'magic' of the medium, a celebration of, and answer to, a popular desire for spectacle. This derives from an enchantment with the illusions of commercial Hollywood cinema as much as from Powell's oft-admitted appetite for tales of escapism and adventure and from his admiration for the German appreciation of the visual. This is particularly apparent in *The Thief of Bagdad* and *A Matter of Life and Death*. But the mesmeric appeals of artistry have a darker side, and elsewhere, Faustian assumption is associated with authorial intent, with the artist both glorified as prophet and demonised as tyrant: hence the Lermontov character in *The Red Shoes*, the image of the authoritarian conductor Thomas Beecham which concludes *The Tales of Hoffmann*, and the more frankly despotic role of Mark's father in *Peeping Tom* (played in a spirit of apparent self-condemnation by Powell himself). Authoritarianism is clearly both fascinating and troubling, particularly when cloaked in mysticism as it is in *The Red Shoes*. Denying dissent, appealing to order, the figure of the magus is a site of coherence, calling for spiritual regeneration and wallowing in the metaphysical: such characteristics are grandiose, Romantic and politically reactionary.

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No film theorist has been more fully committed to the construction of cinematic unity than Sergei Eisenstein. Implicitly recalling the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, he envisages a ‘total’ cinema “that contains a maximum of emotion and stimulating power.”³³ Eisenstein criticises the tendency to view film exclusively in terms of *either* montage or content: “We should have occupied ourselves,” he admits, “more with an examination of the nature of the *unifying principle* itself.”³⁴ While Powell does no more than briefly acknowledge Eisenstein’s work in his autobiography, an anticipation of Powell and Pressburger’s ambitious post-war Technicolor films is to be found in Eisenstein’s writings, principally in the essays “Synchronisation of the Senses” and “Colour and Meaning”.³⁵ They use a similar language: where Powell composed his “organic whole of dialogue, sound effects, and music,”³⁶ in *Black Narcissus*, Eisenstein likewise writes that for his *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), “Many hours went into the fusing of these elements into an organic whole.”³⁷ The concept which Eisenstein develops to structure the synthesis which he envisages is that of ‘vertical montage’, whereby the image-track, sound-track and music are planned and charted as if on an orchestral music score. Mapped out in this way, correspondences between these different regimes are sought: “To remove the barriers between sight and sound, between the seen world and the heard world! To bring about a unity and a harmonious relationship between these two opposite spheres. What an absorbing task!

³³ Sergei Eisenstein (trans. & ed. Jay Leyda). *The Film Sense* (Faber & Faber: London, 1968), p. 14.

³⁴ Eisenstein (1968), p. 18.

³⁵ Each of these essays is to be found in Eisenstein, 1968.

³⁶ Powell (1992), p. 581.

³⁷ Eisenstein (1968), p. 66.

The Greeks and Diderot, Wagner and Scriabin - who has not dreamt of this ideal?"³⁸ Rimbaud and Rimsky-Korsakov are mentioned in his wide-ranging survey of the quest for absolute connections between harmonies, colours and images, and he concludes that "‘synthesis of the various sensations’ is one of the fundamental indications of a romantic work of art."³⁹

In "Colour and Meaning" Eisenstein draws on forms of colour symbolism, examining whether the significantly connoted meanings associated with the parts of the spectrum are arbitrary or intrinsic. Seeking formal laws of correspondence he reverts to the idea of synaesthesia, defined as "the production from one sense-impression of one kind of an associated mental image of a sense-impression of another kind."⁴⁰ Although he finally concedes that no catalogue of absolute relationships can be fixed, the search remains a Romantic one. His appreciation of colour as a system of signification is clearly shared by Michael Powell (who is keenly interested in all relationships between the components of film form and whose relationship to red, in particular, is notorious). The fact that both Eisenstein and Powell celebrate the material nature of their chosen medium, discussing technological developments, colour stock, synchronised sound, lighting techniques, trick shots (and how best to combine them all) while still mystifying the film-making process through metaphysical references to totality, unity and 'organicity' is a measure of how far their discourse derives from early cinema's dialectic of forward and backward looking impulses - part modernist, and part rooted in the aesthetic forms of the previous century.

³⁸ Eisenstein (1968), p. 74.

³⁹ Eisenstein (1968), p. 77.

⁴⁰ Eisenstein (1968), p. 119.

In *Black Narcissus* the coding of colour is all pervasive. It is also highly expressive.⁴¹ Colours obviously come to have solid emotional and tonal associations, something which Eisenstein keenly wrote about.⁴² The redness of *Black Narcissus* taps into a range of familiar connotations (the visceral, corporeality, sexuality, immorality - hence the presumably undeserved reputation of red-heads, and the ripe cliché of the fallen woman). There is also an associative connection between the red of the film and its theme of madness. Rumer Godden's novel refers to Ruth's "wild tempers (feeling) like something dark and wet, flooding her brain, like blood,"⁴³ and this image is recollected in a point-of-view shot of Mr. Dean from Ruth's eyes during her climactic confrontation in his forest house. Red Technicolor dye is haemorrhaged across the screen at the height of Ruth's panic, and she loses consciousness when the screen goes blank. To emphasise the decisiveness of this moment (it marks Ruth's decisive shift into a psychotically detached condition), a contrasting electric blue screen is then presented before the narrative recommences.

An intense relationship between Ruth and her signifying colour is marked early on (her habit is splattered with blood when she first encounters Mr. Dean, and he is wearing a crimson shirt). But some of this colour coding operates at an almost subliminal level to give an unconscious unity to the film. To return to Eisenstein, he had demanded that

⁴¹ There is a historical paradox here. Although the palette of three-strip Technicolor might seem joyously unrealistic to our eyes, its development was promoted as an advance in cinematic naturalism by the company. However, as David Bordwell's history of Technicolor makes clear, "the argument did not convince. On the contrary, Technicolor was identified with the musical comedy, the historical epic, the adventure story and the fantasy - in short, genres of stylization and spectacle." David Bordwell, Janet Staiger & Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1985), p. 355.

⁴² Eisenstein (1968), p. 114.

⁴³ Rumer Godden, *Black Narcissus* (Pan Books Ltd.: London, 1994), p. 46.

“consistency in a definite tone colour-key ... must be given by an imaginary structure in a strict harmony with the work’s theme.”⁴⁴ Here, the relationship between blue and red forms a visual bind, thematically knitting the film together. For example, at Calcutta in the opening moments, the Mother Superior’s office has a blue fan and floor, and contains a lone red chair. Such details seem naturalistic, but throughout the film blueness and redness become ‘values’, pitted against each other throughout. They occur again at the palace (the aquamarine ‘blue room’ bordered in crimson; in the Himalayan ‘scenery’ (sublime blue skies colouring red at dawn with Ruth on the rampage). It is a highly codified, yet instinctively readable use of colour.

5.1.2: The Melodramatic Form: Women, Hysteria, Music

The foregoing might suggest that because of the formal close-harmony in Powell and Pressburger’s post-war aesthetics, all is harmonious in their work. But clearly this is not so. Their narratives are crisis-riven. Anti-realism found space to blossom in their post-war output, and was given shape in ‘excess’ and ‘spectacle’, arguably characteristic features of melodrama. How then does the formal drive towards unity and coherence, implicit in the tight synthesis of the ‘composed film’, match melodrama’s arguable status as an inherently disunited and unstable narrative form? Clearly, Christine Gledhill’s observation that, traditionally, melodrama yearns to invest a post-sacred world with mythic significance seems particularly appropriate.⁴⁵ Given their idealistic philosophy, the

⁴⁴ Eisenstein (1968), p. 122.

⁴⁵ Christine Gledhill, ‘Signs of Melodrama’, in Christine Gledhill (ed.) *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (Routledge: London, 1991), p. 209.

synaesthesia of their Technicolor melodramas is a sign of Powell and Pressburger's striving for the Sublime. During the war years, mythic significance aplenty was to be had in the nation's dominant patriotic rhetoric. The struggles of St. Faith, and of Vicky, dramatise this same sense of aspiration; while their failure to marry happily the two divided provinces is the mark of the melodramatic. Despite any grand Wagnerian aspirations, *Black Narcissus*, *The Red Shoes* and *Gone to Earth* struggle with ideological tensions, and in this they are melodramatic. The formal 'organicity' of the works runs up against a highly wrought evocation of social discord. Notably, issues of gender, of the articulation of the 'feminine', and of female transgression and punishment, bubble to the surface.

Melodrama is said to be a woman's thing. Pam Cook notes that the genre "is differentiated from the rest of cinema by virtue of its construction of a 'female point of view' which motivates and dominates the narrative, and its specific address to a female audience."⁴⁶ So much is largely true, although there are also male melodramas with male protagonists (found for example in the work of Minnelli and Sirk). Many a tear-stained handkerchief testifies to the complex operations at work within the genre, committed, as it is said to be, to the hystericisation of female spectatorship. It is for provoking its intense over-identification with the central woman victim/protagonist that the genre is often disparagingly referred to as the 'woman's weepie'. The dismissiveness of such judgements is, however, misplaced, for clearly melodrama sets up a complex and often conflicting range of subject positions which need to be addressed. The extent to which any such

⁴⁶ Pam Cook, 'Melodrama and the Women's Picture', in Sue Aspinall & Robert Murphy (eds) *Gainborough Melodrama* (B.F.I.: London, 1983), p. 14.

positions are textually *determined* is questionable, and the notion of excess, so intimately related to theories of melodrama, likewise needs careful consideration.

Forced to oscillate between a direct identification with the narrative's central (and passive) woman figure, and the assumption of an active male-protagonist position, the female spectator is cast, according to the 'Mulveyan paradigm' of classic narrative cinema, somewhat precariously.⁴⁷ Given melodrama's characteristic exaggeration of female victimhood, this spectator's oscillations grow even wilder. Decisively, though, Laura Mulvey's model of cinema's inherently masculine apparatus is more a *call to arms* for a feminist cinema practice than a statement about the psycho-dynamics of female spectatorship (hence its status as an exemplary text of so-called 'Screen Theory'). A polemic for the avant-garde, it advocates, with admirable asceticism, the renunciation of pleasure, where that pleasure can be dubiously gained only through complicity with an innately masculine cinematic machine. Returning to the vexed issue of women's place (or lack of it) within a determinedly male institution, Mulvey's 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure"' famously accounts for female spectatorship in terms of a transvestism - a donning of masculine attributes - and she implicitly gives any such dressing-up a severe dressing-down.⁴⁸ Other than by accepting a male position, Mulvey perceives that the only site for female spectatorship is the masochistic identification with the powerless female victim of the narrative.

Here, some theoretical positioning needs to be unpacked. Mulvey argues in favour of a denial of cinematic pleasure because she seeks a cinematic discourse which might

⁴⁷ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, Vol. 19 no. 3, Autumn 1975. Reprinted in Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (MacMillan: Basingstoke, 1989).

⁴⁸ Laura Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)', in Mulvey, 1989.

harry the dominant cinematic code (i.e. classical cinema) and offer an alternative to it. Feminist criticism has long distrusted the cinematically spectacular, post-1968 film culture *per se* having been interrogated for signs that it is an agent of the dominant social order. Yet rather than condemning any perceived denial of femininity in Mulvey's 'transgendered' or masochistic positions, subsequent theorists have applauded such strategies as emancipatory 'masquerades', after Joan Riviere's use of the term.⁴⁹ Psychoanalytical theory has thus found a post-modern potential in these adopted subject positions. With a methodological shift towards the empirical, Ien Ang's work on the television series *Dallas* and the pleasures it affords its female audience is exemplary of a body of work within Reception Studies. The dilemma motivating Ang is that *real* women audiences gain real pleasure from identifying with the tragic structures and the fatalistic passivity which marks the women characters in the series: how then does feminism permit them that pleasure, without abandoning its own fundamentally Utopian struggle? The answer, for Ang, is to be found in the very fact of fantasising: "producing and consuming fantasies allows for a play with reality, which can be felt as 'liberating' because it is fictional, not real. In the play of fantasy we can adopt positions ... without having to worry about their 'reality value' ... (T)hese identifications can be pleasurable ... because they create the possibility of being pessimistic, sentimental or despairing with impunity."⁵⁰

While more radical voices might criticise this as quietist, the attention which Ang and others have given to viewers' locally negotiated suspensions of disbelief is valuable -

⁴⁹ Joan Riviere, 'Womanliness and the Masquerade', in Victor Burgin et al (eds) *Formations of Fantasy* (Routledge: London, 1986).

⁵⁰ Ien Ang, 'Dallas and Feminism', in Paul Marris & Sue Thornham, *Media Studies: A Reader* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 1996), p. 384.

both because it undoes the theorised textual determinism of *Screen Theory in extremis*, and crucially because it recuperates for modern theory the principle of pleasure over which it has long wrestled. Likewise, active responses, such as those posited by theories of the masquerade, praise the strategies and performances by which spectators adopt multiple, shifting and dynamic positions. Melodrama itself, as a pleasurable mode, stands up as an ‘alternative’ cinematic language. Its very excess does for classical cinema exactly what Mulvey’s advocated brand of political modernism does. Namely, it critiques the classicism. Its excess can, moreover, be read as liberatory, offering a sensual overload which compensates for the masochistic structures of identification which are otherwise on offer.

Leaving pleasure aside for the time being, the narratives of Powell and Pressburger’s melodramatic trio do conform to a pattern, namely the ‘hysterical scenario’, in which the heroine, characteristically denied the scope for self-expression, is faced with an impossible choice between two equally unacceptable positions. In *Black Narcissus* it is between spirituality and sexuality, and this polarisation is dramatised in the splitting of the protagonist figure into Clodagh and her alter-ego Ruth. In *Gone to Earth*, Hazel is torn between good and bad men. Vicky’s dilemma in *The Red Shoes* is exemplified in a triangular tableau in which Julian Craster (marriage, domesticity, passivity) and Boris Lermontov (creativity, expression, isolation) battle for her body and soul. Her ‘choice’ is between conformity within a tightly circumscribed social space, and a rebellion against it which moves into an uncertain territory and threatens to be self-destructive. Tragically, this alternative space permits her self-expression as an female artist, yet paradoxically demands that it be choreographed and orchestrated by men (and while clearly there are women in the theatre audience watching her dance, it is her observation by the men in the

ballet company - Lermontov, Julian, Ljubov, Ratov - which is underscored in the text).

The Red Shoes enacts this very schism.

Femininity has long been connected with passivity and silence. Powell and Pressburger at least seem to deviate from this. Many 'strong women' are to be found in their films. The post-war melodramas, where women characters do 'strike out' to express and to act upon desire, contain much that might be read as 'positive'. Ruth's rebellion expresses single-mindedness of purpose, courage, an independent spirit, and sexual freedom. In breaking free of the bonds of a rule-dominated, organised religion, she enters a 'wild zone', yet what makes this feminist gesture so genuinely hysterical is that in escaping the structures of Christianity, she is running to man. It is a simultaneous rejection of, and longing for, patriarchal authority. Receiving nothing but rejection, she shifts into madness: if it is hardly a positive fantasy of liberation, it at least reminds us of the risks and anxieties which are the obverse of fantasy.

Black Narcissus re-explores a pattern familiar from *49th Parallel* onwards - the group sent onto alien land where it is tested. What the later film clearly shows, with its rejection of 'real' location-shooting in favour of a highly artificial and 'subjective' mindscape, is that 'fantasy' (with all its metacinematic implications) has become the key focus of attention, and that this is now the 'alien territory'. A form of psychical reality, rooted in the sub-conscious, takes precedence over the empirical, and the boundaries which are crossed are thus internal ones. Images of palace doors opening in *Black Narcissus* - notably majestic double-doors sweeping open to reveal the rocky precipice and the palace bell - connote transitions from one imaginative space to another. Significantly, the Sisters' arrival at Mopu is inaugurated by Ruth (in her first appearance in the film) opening those doors to ringing the bell ecstatically. Along with the 'Red

Shoes' ballet sequence and *The Tales of Hoffmann*, the Palace of Mopu marks Powell and Pressburger's most confrontational rebuttal of the British realist tradition. Importantly, this engagement with fantasy mirrors their previous treatments of the 'Other'. As Laplanche and Pontalis concede, "it is difficult ... to avoid defining this world (the fantastic) in terms of *what it is not*, the world of reality" (my italics).⁵¹ Fantasy and reality are dialectically opposed, and however we conceptualise the regime of the imagination, it remains an *other* space, liable to grow monstrous, to invade 'reality'. The neurosis in these films is a measure of fantasy's refusal to keep to its own territory. *The Red Shoes*' very construction as a tale within a tale is undone by the final reel's failure to keep these provinces safely separate. The stage, the religion of art, and the will-to-dance dramatised by the 'Red Shoes' ballet represent an intensified regime; Vicky's marriage to Julian represents the real. The demonic possession of Vicky which brings her death marks an overspill from the magic space of the theatre into her everyday life. It is a catastrophic inversion of her initial wish to aspire to the metaphysical condition embodied by Lermontov. This is, perhaps the critical reversal which the post-war years bring. It can no longer simply be maintained that Powell and Pressburger plot idealistic aspiration. The metaphysical may well still be present, but it does not blossom: in these turbulent films it turns around to confront and demolish the everyday by invading its 'realistic' world. The cross-currents between these two regimes are shifting, although theories of melodrama have attempted to chart their dynamics nevertheless. Perhaps, though, the true defining characteristic of melodrama is its very incalculable instability.

⁵¹ Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, 'Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality', reprinted in Burgin et al (eds). p. 6.

These films all tell of the struggle to sublimate. They chart how unexpressed mental processes find a displaced outlet in neurosis. Freud argues in his *Three Essays on Sexuality* that such repressed energies “strive to obtain an expression that shall be appropriate to their emotional importance - to obtain a discharge; and in the case of hysteria they find such an expression ... in somatic phenomena, that is in hysterical symptoms.”⁵² The restraints demanded by the Order of St. Faith in *Black Narcissus* and the Ballet Lermontov in *The Red Shoes* produce an instability which is writ large in the apparently undisciplined surplus of Powell’s overcharged mise-en-scène. Desire, frustrated elsewhere, is discharged in Technicolor (this argument borrows from Geoffrey Nowell-Smith’s pertinent reading of melodrama in terms of Freudian conversion hysteria - an argument which is discussed in some detail later⁵³). With the relationship to reality disturbed, the mise-en-scène becomes an index of the narrative’s own hysteria. The directors’ characteristically Romantic appetites, re-channelled along the generic coordinates of melodrama, are transformed to express neuroticised desires in a lavish visual form. The fantasy embodied in the mise-en-scène replaces the transcendent aspirations, the longing for ‘Home’ and the patriotic nostalgia which were evident in works such as *A Canterbury Tale* and *Colonel Blimp*. To sublimate is to raise to a rarefied plane - to idealise. The dynamics of this process can be traced in the way each of the post-war melodramas pushes towards a higher or more intense level of existence, be it spiritual transcendence, mythical communion, sexual fulfilment, or a confused medley of all three. The Sisterhood’s faith, interrogated by the sublime atmosphere of the Himalayas; Ruth’s

⁵² Sigmund Freud. ‘Three Essays on Sexuality’. in Sigmund Freud. *The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis* (Penguin: London, 1986). pp. 306/7.

⁵³ Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. ‘Minnelli and Melodrama’. in Christine Gledhill (ed.) *Home is Where the Heart is* (B.F.I. Publishing: London, 1987)

contrary passion for Mr. Dean, Hazel's folkloric superstitions; Vicky's ballet (ambiguously both a striving for the ideal, and, given the sexual meanings of the red shoes and the focus on her dancing body, an expression of female sexuality): each of these marks a desire for plenitude. None is achievable. Each of the protagonists is thwarted. It is as though the utopianism once symbolised in Canterbury Cathedral has come tumbling down. A final lingering shot of the red shoes, however, tells us that to Powell and Pressburger, the *desire* for absolutes is more important than its *attainment*. It is readable as an endorsement of the Romantic imagination. The fact that Vicky is very obviously dancing as she flies to her death confirms that the film appreciates the value of her metaphysical aspirations, even if it is mindless of the cost.

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The notion of a relationship between the 'imagination' and a visualised mise-en-scène is not a new one. In the sense that the imagination conceives in 'images' there has always been a link between the two ideas. Freud's 1924 essay *The Loss of Reality in Neurosis and Psychosis* sketches an imagined space in which the (specifically neurotic and female) subject re-stages reality satisfactorily: "This is made possible" he writes, "by the existence of a *world of phantasy*, of a domain which became separated from the real external world at the time of the introduction of the reality principle."⁵⁴ A similar metaphor occurs in Joseph Breuer's account of the hysteric Anna O, whose day-dream retreat from reality is referred to as her "private theatre."⁵⁵ Victor Burgin has more recently accounted for the alternative reality of the unconscious as a "mysterious area of transaction, ... that space

⁵⁴ Freud, p. 571.

⁵⁵ Joseph Breuer & Sigmund Freud, *Studies in Hysteria* (Penguin: London, 1974), p. 74.

in which fantasy stages its mise-en-scène of desire.”⁵⁶ In a Romantic tradition which valorises the imagination and hotly pursues the Ideal, Powell and Pressburger strive for just this reified domain. The ‘Red Shoes’ ballet, for example, is displayed in what is visualised as a ‘private theatre’ of Vicky’s imagination, while *Black Narcissus* is in an India of the mind.

Black Narcissus, *The Red Shoes* and *Gone to Earth* therefore invite a psychological approach. Elaine Showalter’s *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* maps out patriarchal culture’s too quick association of women with insanity, and these films can be seen to operate along Freudian lines to make just that connection.⁵⁷ For struggling to make a space for themselves, Powell and Pressburger’s female protagonists suffer narrative punishment. Starkly put, we are given a three almost consecutive films, each of which climaxes with a transgressing heroine falling to her death, graphically labouring the allegory of the ‘fallen women’. Interestingly, in his late work, *Age of Consent*, Powell will seem flushed with generosity, for here he will allow his sexualised young heroine to bloom. In a culture which has passed through its sexual revolution, and which comes to idealise its youth, *Age of Consent* sees Powell refigure any earlier misogyny with a new found ageism, sending instead the heroine’s elderly grandmother (a repressive, puritanical force throughout the film) plummeting over a cliff to her death. The values of *Black Narcissus* are thus reversed: earlier, the old (and dubiously foreign) grandmaternal figure, Angu Ayah, had mocked the high ideals of the

⁵⁶ Victor Burgin, ‘Introduction’ in Burgin et al (eds), p. 2.

⁵⁷ Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (Virago Press Ltd: London, 1985).

nuns and shared with Mr. Dean a nostalgia for the lecherous old days of the Temple of Women; in that film it is the vibrant Sister Ruth whose energy must be eradicated.

As Showalter's study has shown, some psychoanalytical discourse can be read as a patriarchal exercise in control. So too can the punitive closure meted out to Sister Ruth, Vicky, and Hazel Woodus. Yet a more sympathetic interpretation is available. The classic texts of Joseph Breuer and Sigmund Freud, such as the studies of Anna O and later of Dora, can be seen as emancipatory accounts of heroic struggles against an impossible status quo. Likewise, these films can be said to grant visual pleasures (and arguably a female articulation, although that is another separate argument) which vie with their reactionary content. In Anna O, Breuer found a patient "bubbling over with intellectual vitality (who) led an extremely monotonous existence in her puritanically-minded family."⁵⁸ Her neurotic symptoms are a creative escape from her domestic confinement - a visible, semiotic code expressing the frustrations she is unable to communicate through consciously articulated speech. Her hysterical seizures are a creative rebellion.

The Archers' visual innovations (harking to the aesthetics of silent film), their use of colour and of music similarly push forward the cinematic medium beyond the constraints of realism and into a luxuriant, pulsating glut of hysteria, of carnival, of melodrama. It is possible, of course, to read a gendered inflection into this discursive dialogue. Powell gives the music-track a *primus inter pares* status in the pre-composed sequences of these films (echoing the priorities of the 'composed film', Julian Craster mocks Lermontov to Vicky in *The Red Shoes* by declaring heavy-handedly that "nothing matters but the music!"). Within this hierarchy of discourses, the privileged sphere of

⁵⁸ Breuer & Freud, p. 74.

music can theoretically be allied with the feminine: given that the scripted narratives speak of hysterical scenarios caused by the cultural silencing of women, the feminine is allowed no other way of registering itself aurally, and the music is thus a displacement of the female voice. Classically constructed films typically use sound - particularly extra-diegetic music - to buttress the regime of the visible. The relationship may be sympathetic, or contrapuntal, but the visual regime has authority and is allied theoretically to values which are empirical and patriarchal. In melodramas, and more so in Powell and Pressburger's pre-recorded sequences, the music dominates, and what we see is organised according to a governing principle which is fundamentally musical. Given that melodramas tend to be 'women's films', there is good reason to seek signs of the feminine in the music soundtrack.

The implications of this are several. The musical code is non-verbal, and it can also be construed as non- or pre-logical: certainly it is associated with the realm of the 'feelings'. In Mary Ann Doane's words, "the ineffable, intangible quality of sound - its lack of the concreteness which is conducive to an ideology of empiricism - requires that it be placed on the side of the emotional or intuitive."⁵⁹ Eisenstein himself noted this relationship, and went further to suggest that music is inherently polysemic. Music, he writes, "is remarkable in that the images created by it flow continuously ... Music has preserved this emotional plurality of meaning in its speech, the plurality of meaning which has been displaced from language that seeks precision, distinctness, and logical exhaustion."⁶⁰ If the logical 'language' which Eisenstein speaks of has masculine

⁵⁹ Mary Ann Doane, 'Ideology and the Practice of Sound Editing and Mixing', in Teresa de Lauretis & Stephen Heath (eds) *The Cinematic Apparatus* (Macmillan: London, 1980) p. 47.

⁶⁰ Sergei Eisenstein, *Eisenstein on Disney* (Methuen: London, 1988) p. 28.

characteristics, then musical language, however generally, comes to be connoted with the feminine. Again, psychoanalytical theory offers support here. Julia Kristeva's notion of the 'semiotic' - a disruptive 'pre-signifying' and feminine energy working within language - performs the same function which Eisenstein allots to the musical code. This 'semiotic' is committed to the anarchy of the pleasure principle, and is bound up with the Freudian unconscious. The Symbolic regime works to harness this energy; the semiotic resists such regimentation and constantly threatens to burst through the policed border of the Symbolic, harrying its sense of order. A carnivalesque force, it is given a privileged role in some forms of discourse: Kristeva singles out moments of transgressive holy ecstasy, madness and poetry, at its most subversive in the writings of the avant-garde. She also suggests, specifically, that music is "constructed exclusively on the basis of the semiotic."⁶¹ All of this advances the case that the musicality of *The Red Shoes* and *Black Narcissus* registers an active (and arguably subversive) feminine desire.

In the scoring of 'The Red Shoes' ballet, Vicky's imagined descent into an underworld, demi-monde regime is marked by an energetic jazz riff, connoting the sexual license of the sequence. This section of the ballet features fairground attractions, clowns and side-shows, so notions of the carnivalesque are clearly to the fore. The narrative of the ballet, though, is doom-laden for its heroine/victim, and during the fairground sequence, the girl's *joie de vivre* quickly pales. The crucial point must also be made here, that the music of the ballet is composed and conducted (both intra- and extra-diegetically) by men. This is particularly important as it is Vicky's lover Julian who plays the tune to which she must dance, and during the rehearsal sequences of the film, his input into the

⁶¹ Julia Kristeva, 'Revolutions on Poetic Language', in Toril Moi (ed.) *The Kristeva Reader* (Basil Blackwell Ltd.: London, 1986) p. 92.

creative process, and the power allotted to him, is clearly given precedence over her contribution. Blatantly imposing a masculine (phallic) law, Julian shouts at her “You see this baton? Well follow it!” But the question of authorship is one of the key themes, and Vicky’s passive function in the ballet (mirroring, of course, the girl’s lack of control over her dance in the Anderson tale which forms the film’s kernel) is qualified yet again by Julian’s last minute concession that he will follow her as she dances to her own sense of time. Beyond the interior sphere of the contained ballet(s) is the sequence in which Vicky is called to Lermontov’s Monte Carlo residence to be given the role in ‘The Red Shoes’. Anticipating romance (perhaps), Vicky is wearing a fabulous gown, and even a small crown. The sequence is implicitly subjective, as a fantasy of being a fairy-tale princess seems to come true. Music plays a crucial role here, for if the iron gates into Lermontov’s mountain retreat, and the overgrown stone staircase which lead Vicky to his door, seem invested with magic (like the Beast’s garden and castle in Jean Cocteau’s *La Belle et la Bête* (1946)), then it is a haunting operatic aria (a female voice) on the soundtrack which gives it this quality. Affiliated to Vicky’s own fantasies, this music seems incontrovertibly to express a female subjectivity. Even this, however, comes to be brought within a masculine sphere as Julian’s subsequent control over Vicky revolves around his successful composition of his own opera ‘Cupid and Psyche’ at the expense of Vicky’s dancing career.

Extra-diegetic music is also linked to a feminine energy in *Black Narcissus*, although in a very different fashion, as it is the renegade Ruth’s encounter with Mr. Dean which initiates the ‘composed’ section of the film. The tense rhythm which accompanies her murderous return to Clodagh clearly broadcasts the throb of her quickening pulse. Orchestral music has expressed irrationality and licentiousness already: during the

montage which accompanies Mr. Dean's scene-setting letter, 'ghosts of a bygone age' - the spirits of the old General's concubines - have been heard calling to Angu Ayah, and choral outbursts later in the film retain some of their supernatural connotations. Similarly, the music and sounds of a ghostly fox-hunt pursue the superstitious Hazel in *Gone to Earth*, and she acts out a spell to hear what she takes to be 'fairy music' (but which is revealed to us to be nothing more weird than her father's harp). The persistent drum beat which punctuates the closing sequence of *Black Narcissus* has also been cued earlier, to ominous effect: it is heard as a vigil for the ailing General, its cessation marking his death. These connotations aptly spill into the final section as Ruth seems possessed by morbid tendencies (just as Vicky is also possessed by her red shoes as the overture to Julian's ballet score is heard on the soundtrack). Choral outbursts match the sudden cut to Ruth in her red dress when first seen by Clodagh. The same dramatic outbursts later reinforce extreme close-up shots of Ruth's psychotic eyes in the closing moments of the sequence, a clear repetition of 'shock tactics', while a gradual orchestral crescendo marks Clodagh's increasing vulnerability as she is uncannily felt to be not alone in the chapel. This entire sequence is largely lacking in dialogue. Its key dramatic function is to display the murderous effects of Ruth's thwarted sexual desires. Such desires are, in the main, literally unspeakable, with Ruth's vocal declaration of love to Mr. Dean coming only after a disastrously damaging period of repression.

Reservoirs of significant feeling can thus be felt in the extra-diegetic soundtrack of the film. A similarly subversive (and arguably feminine) principle is applicable to its visual appearance. This is because it is so heavily marked as excessive, as 'symbolic', because it signifies beyond the confines of classical form. Melodrama, as Thomas Elsaesser has remarked, relies upon "a dynamic use of spatial and musical categories

(rather than) intellectual or literary ones.”⁶² As in the expressionistically inflected design of films such as Lang’s *M*, anxiety is projected into space. Given the impotence or passivity typically allotted to the central woman within the narratives of melodrama, there is a psychoanalytical justification for this, which draws, as Geoffrey Nowell-Smith has pointed out, upon conversion hysteria:

The undischarged emotion which cannot be accommodated within the action ... is traditionally expressed in the music and, in the case of film, in certain elements of the *mise en scène*. That is to say, music and *mise en scène* do not just heighten the emotionality of an element of the action: to some extent they substitute for it. The mechanism here is strikingly similar to that of the psychopathology of hysteria.⁶³

This then is the psychological reasoning: melodrama’s *mise-en-scène* enacts an allegory of hysteria, in which the latent articulation of the ‘silenced’ is channelled into another form - is shifted into visual/musical metaphor. As I have acknowledged, the narratives of Powell and Pressburger’s melodramatic trilogy do conform to this psychologised pattern.

Again, it is the very unspeakability of what the visuals express which is the cause of the distortion. In the strict moral code of the Sisterhood, sex is unmentionable, of course. Complaining to Mr. Dean about Kanchi, Clodagh can only say of her that “she is ... what she is”, glossing awkwardly over the truth. Later, Clodagh’s confrontation with Ruth regarding Mr. Dean exemplifies the workings of conversion hysteria. Called to see

⁶² Thomas Elsaesser, ‘Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama’, in Gledhill (ed.), p. 51.

⁶³ Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, ‘Minnelli and Melodrama’, in Gledhill (ed.), p. 73.

Clodagh, Ruth's mannerisms as she enters the Sister Superior's study seem to shriek her tensions immediately. Her rigid movements are well-nigh robotic. The two nuns sit facing each other across Clodagh's desk, in significantly mirrored shots which emphasise the doubling between them which becomes more apparent as the narrative unfolds. Clodagh first quizzes Ruth sympathetically, enquiring what is wrong with her, for she looks so ill, but Ruth's response is that she "can't speak of it. To anyone." As they square up to each other, repeated shots of Ruth, from a height near that of the desk, emphasise the barely coded phallic symbolism invested in a bell handle in front of her. Girding herself to broach the painfully unspoken topic of their conversation, Clodagh likewise fingers a pencil nervously. This is emphasised in one of the film's occasional and very significant extreme close-ups, the same shot tilting up towards Ruth as Clodagh's voice tentatively and euphemistically ventures her suspicion that Ruth has "let (herself) fall into thinking too much of Mr. Dean." It has now been said; and the implicit admission of repressed sexual desire precipitates a tense exchange between the pair. In this brief sequence, obvious connotations have been rendered spatially, and have been grappled with euphemistically. As the confrontation closes and Ruth leaves, an orchestral accompaniment adds a melodramatic flourish before a brief diminuendo and a fade to black restores some sense of calm. Suddenly, a full orchestra blares a fanfare at us, as brief shots of brilliant rhododendron flowers fill the screen. It is a surprising moment. The flowers are redolent of female sexuality, of the exotic Indian sub-continent, of decadence (Philippa's planting of flowers rather than vegetables has already been flagged as a sign that her spirit has wandered from the Sisterhood's pragmatic work ethic). More than this, though, the flowers are vessels, gushing with the contorted sexuality of the preceding sequence, and they initiate two similarly charged moments: the arrival of Sister Ruth's dress (as yet

unseen), and a curiously warped and sado-masochistic episode in which Ayah commands the young general to finish whipping Kanchi and become a man. The vibrant colours of the flowers percolate through the film's last reel to nourish the symbolic redness of Ruth's dress.

A caveat can be entered here. Because the emotion which Nowell-Smith speaks of is projected *out* of the narrative proper and towards 'pure' spectacle, it crucially follows that it is perceived as excess - as something *beyond* the narrative function, something which has pulled free from the classic regime of linear causality. 'Meaning' is not so much diverted as it is surpassed, and the implications of this perceived excessiveness need to be examined. For Nowell-Smith, melodrama's basic conventions are those of realism, and the "hysterical moment of the text can be identified as the point at which the realist representative convention breaks down."⁶⁴ If the hysterical elements are qualified, or compromised, or just superfluous, then their status as repositories of the Powell and Pressburger's more sublime or metaphysical aspirations is necessarily undone.

Although it has a neatness, Nowell-Smith's diagnosis of conversion hysteria sets up a chain of arresting repercussions. His model makes the melodramatic text itself neurotic, and on one level, this would seem to invalidate it (for the process of conversion is an index of abnormal functioning). In his theory, an absence is alluded to, and that absence is the textual body 'in good health'. However, while the neurotic analysand recuperates through the 'talking cure', melodrama's paradox has been that in breaching ideological constraints it tells a tale that cannot be told, speaking most lucidly through fissures and silences. Its contradictions cannot be rectified, its scars cannot be healed. In

⁶⁴ Nowell-Smith in Gledhill (ed.), p. 74.

short, it bears its wounds. In this degree, it is radical: no uncompromised or wholesome closure is available. No home. No Utopia. The excessive becomes, however, a sign of sickness, and by implication the theory desires a return to health: the notion that excess is an index of progressiveness is annulled.

The very concept of excess depends, of course, upon some recognition of boundaries. The theory of cinematic excess takes as its premiss an accepted notion of classical form which is to be superseded. 'Excess', though, suggests a quantitative measurement of style. Beyond what utilitarian level does the excessive exceed? How far? According to what criteria is the 'appropriate' measure of meaning set? 'Classical cinema' is defined according to functional criteria, and such questioning reveals a set of rationalist assumptions regarding cinematic discourse. But it also implies a *qualitative* judgement, for when the cup is full, that which runneth over could be said to be implicitly non-essential and wasted. Is that which is excessive not merely redundant (for 'excess' in film may not simply be marked by hyperbole, but also by needless repetition)? There is a problem of terminology here, although it is more than just that.

Even to applaud the verve of cinematic 'excess' is to observe the benchmark it surpasses, thus invidiously admitting the utilitarian, and this is the problem which the concept of excess carries. It has been suggested that the pre-composed musical and excessively visual elements in *Black Narcissus* can work subversively. Yet the dominant, more repressive elements co-exist, and are complicatedly bound up somewhere inside that excessive bubbling of meaning. Any dissident text or dissident reading, seeking to expose ideological contradiction, in a sense relies upon an implicit reference to the dominant structure which it sets out to critique. As Alan Sinfield observes, dissidence "has to invoke those structures to oppose them, and therefore can always, *ipso facto*, be

discovered reinscribing that which it proposes to critique ... Any position supposes its *op*-position. All stories comprise within themselves the ghosts of the alternative stories they are trying to exclude.”⁶⁵ In accounts of ‘cinematic excess’, the alternative story or stable benchmark is, broadly speaking, the coherent, resolved and internally consistent form known as classical narrative, a style which is well-marshalled, unitary, complete, and founded in realism. But the very presence of subversive elements obliterates the ordered formation which realism demands. Ontologically, the two elements - the excessive and the realistic - are mutually exclusive, yet paradoxically, ‘excess’ alludes to a classical structure while simultaneously banishing it. In short, the term ‘excess’, as taken up in film theory, is both the supplement of and (incompatibly) the antithesis of classical realism. Even if subversiveness is somehow hidden in a masquerade of conformity, the ‘realist’ ingredient is necessarily and irreparably compromised by its presence. Given the demeanour of the damned, classical realism’s signifying practices - bound up with film’s capacity to ‘reproduce’ reality - are exorcised, but first have to be invoked. The formal expression of dominant ideology must therefore be raised in order for it to be discredited. This is, to use Alan Sinfield’s point, the paradox of dissident or marginal texts. However celebratory and apparently simple the idea of excess seems at first to be, there is therefore a logical flaw in the concept. Dissidence, contrariness, internal dialogues, polyvocality: terms such as these may in the long term prove more fruitful.

The very premiss that melodrama dramatises a frontier between realistic, lived experience and its ideally envisioned corollary accepts that the form engages in a dialogue between discourses. This is why melodrama has been seen to be so politically engaged:

⁶⁵ Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1992), p. 47.

conflicts between such separated languages signify ideological faultlines. Given the established affinity between British Cinema and realism, Powell and Pressburger's heavy investment in the 'excessive' has an attenuated significance. It flags them as stylistic renegades, and makes their melodrama a national issue. It is a telling admission of Powell's that in *Black Narcissus* he "started out almost as a documentary director and ended up as a producer of opera."⁶⁶ Certainly the source text, Rumer Godden's novel, is more committedly naturalist in style. The film wrestles with these two startlingly different dialects. As David Farrar's voice-over reads Mr. Dean's introductory letter to the Sisters in the film's opening sequence, there is clearly a consonance between his sensible pragmatism and the accompanying montage sequence showing scenes from the General's estate. An issue of gender is clearly at stake here. In this, their most female-centred film, a man is granted the superiority of what is in effect an extra-diegetic voice - for we have not yet seen Mr. Dean, and his voice has yet to be 'rooted' in the narrative. This man, furthermore, represents the masculine world which will crowd in on and disrupt the Sisters' sanctuary. For some time, a close-up of his letter is shown as he begins to recite the clearly visible typed script. This apparently redundant repetition marks Mr. Dean's control of both the written and the spoken word, and his autobiographical opening ("My name is Dean") he stakes his claim to this power. His spoken and written words then conjure images of the General's estate at Mopu. This footage - establishing shots of the 'Himalayan landscape' and close-ups of natives working on the land - is in a documentary style, married to a male voice-over which is well-nigh a parody of 1940s Griersonian paternalism: "The people are like mountain peasants everywhere: simple, independent.

⁶⁶ Powell (1992), p. 583.

They work because they must. They smile when they feel like it and they're no respecter of persons. The men are men: no better and no worse than anywhere else. The women are women; the children, children." It sounds and looks like a disinterested travelogue commentary, albeit that the obvious studio set parades its artificiality.⁶⁷ The film does not abandon this documentary style altogether: as the Sisterhood begins to settle at the Palace, a further brief montage of toiling locals mirrors these first impressions. Later, Joseph Antony, the young interpreter, is seen teaching the local schoolchildren English, innocently training them in a significantly male-oriented discourse by naming weaponry for them: "Can-non; War-ship; Bay-o-net!" As the Sisterhood drifts into distraction, and alternative, impractical impulses come to dominate, Joseph Antony's lessons will then centre on identifying Sister Philippa's decorative flower beds instead. Mr. Dean's voice, however, emboldened by alcohol during the Christmas carol service, will still hold its power, if only to the admiring young General, Dilip Rai, to whom it is "so nice and loud".

The information gleaned from Mr. Dean is a touchstone of reliable narration in a film which is otherwise devoid of objectivity. 'His' narrative parenthesises the dream-world atmosphere which dominates the rest of the film. In a parallel gesture, when the 'location' sequence initiated by Mr. Dean's voice-over cuts back to Sister Clodagh and the Mother Superior in Calcutta, we are shown a scattering of black-and-white photographs of the General's estate which the nuns are examining. These 'scientifically

⁶⁷ *The Red Shoes* contains similar 'documentary' moments which are in dialogue with the 'magic' backstage world of the film as a whole. Our first view of Covent Garden, as both Julian and Vicky arrive there to start work for Lermontov, alludes implicitly to the typical style of the British documentary movement. The high-angle establishing long-shot of the market, and the subsequent tracking-shot following Julian through the crowds, have a 'slice of life' quality to them. Extra-diegetically, (but mixed in with noises of the market), a male voice sings a song, "You went to Covent Garden in the morning" - a touch which echoes the audio-visual montage style of Humphrey Jennings. The shot ends with one of the market traders casting himself as a 'cockney type' by wolf-whistling Vicky with the exclamation "What a corker!" as she enters the theatre.

verifiable' photographic images clearly lay claim to a truth status, despite the fact that what they represent is Alfred Junge's fabricated studio set. They quiz the veracity of the visible, and by extension issues to do with Western empirical traditions are addressed - issues which are animated by Powell's very decision to 'interiorise' Rumer Godden's novel. The 'realism' of the montage sequence and of the photographs (geared as they are towards capturing the real) is deeply entwined in empiricism, while clearly the modernist current in both *Black Narcissus* and *The Red Shoes* aims instead towards subjective interiority. The external world is demoted or excluded, and Freudianisms are paraded for all to see.

The fatalistic resignation which Dean articulates is exactly what the proud and ambitious Sister Clodagh rails against, as the imperviousness of the Himalayan environment to the Sisterhood's efforts leaves her distraught. The sequence which visualises the contents of Dean's letter is separate from the style of the film at large. Although the realist-documentary style is soon left behind as *Black Narcissus* comes to inhabit Clodagh's (and Ruth's) distorted point of view, the two forms can be seen to be in implicit dialogue. A highly symbolic audio-visual regime may well replace Dean's realistic montage, yet ultimately the subjective world is confounded, as Dean's assessment that the Palace is 'no place to put a nunnery' is proved to be unavoidably true. The qualifying point may also be made, of course, that while the images seen in the early montage sequence are triggered by Dean's words, they derive in fact from Clodagh's reading of the letter. Given the highly fantastical nature of the mise-en-scène at Mopu, the status of this first impression of the Palace, its environs, and even of Dean's voice itself, may not be so simple as it superficially appears - for even this seemingly impartial sequence of film is polluted with the unreliable taint of the Sister's imagination.

If distinctions between documentary and fantasy are characteristically undone here (as they were in *A Canterbury Tale* and *The Volunteer*), then, similarly, any neatly conceptualised boundaries between west and east are also put under scrutiny. The charge may well be made that Pressburger's script for *Black Narcissus*, and Powell's decision to let India be imaginatively recreated in a London studio, subscribe to a crude orientalism, the realities of Indian life (arguably represented with greater authenticity in Godden's novel) discarded, and a naturalistic storyline beefed up into a Eurocentric fantasy. This line of attack requires that the geographical space which the Sisterhood finds itself in is no more than a screen onto which Western anxieties might be projected. In the degree to which the studio set is coloured by Clodagh/Ruth's increasing neuroses, there is some validity in the accusation. The Orient is used to offer an alternative to the Western values established in the Order of St Faith. That Western regime, with its reliance upon science and rationality, and firmly rooted in the reality principle, is commonly presented as a moral and cultural justification for imperialism. Its Enlightenment discourse sustains the missionary zeal of Empire by permitting the exotic and the foreign to signify that which should be brought under the control of a regimented Western order. As Edward Said has remarked, within this discourse, "the Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, 'different', thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, 'normal'... The Oriental is *contained* and *represented* by dominating frameworks."⁶⁸ While elements of this can be seen in the way *Black Narcissus* views both the peasantry and the young General, some qualifying comments need to be made. First, the most significant 'Other' which the text animates is clearly Sister Ruth, Clodagh's pursuing doppelganger: this is the most

⁶⁸ Edward Said. *Orientalism* (Pelican Books: London, 1985), p. 40.

dramatic splitting in the text, not that between east and west. Furthermore, there is no attempt to ‘pass off’ the studio set as an authentic recreation of India, and the attempts of the westerners to impose themselves upon the Himalayan environment are clearly mocked from the outset. But most importantly, the text actually problematises the very distinction between ‘East’ and ‘West’ and touches on the undoing of geographical ‘Otherness’. *Black Narcissus* revels jokingly in its cross-culturalism. Dilip Rai’s scent, ‘Black Narcissus’ seems to evoke the exotic and the sensual, but was purchased from the Army and Navy Store in London. On horseback, he is heard to cry “Ride On!” in an American accent, identifying himself more with the cowboy than with the Indian (this touch, added into the film, is not present in the novel). Mr. Dean, the voice of rationalism, seems to have ‘gone native’, while General Todo Rai, played in heavy disguise by Archers stalwart Esmond Knight, is known to be westernised. Young Kanchi (also played by a European, of course) carries a western gentleman’s umbrella, while the ‘wise man’ meditating on the hillside is revealed to be General Krishna Rai, a decorated cosmopolitan who has now abandoned his European lifestyle. The legend of Narcissus suggests some collapse of boundaries between Self and Other, of course. Here, tidy geographical demarcations are also done away with. Even those rhododendron blossoms have a cross-cultural significance, for these staple garden plants of the English country house (the ones here were filmed at Leonardslee in Sussex) are imported souvenirs of the British in India.

In a parallel gesture, the efforts of the protagonists to drive a wedge between the body and the spirit, visualised in the contrast between carnal reds and ethereal sky-blues in the mise-en-scène is similarly undone by the narrative. Colour is used more dramatically here than in *Blimp*, for example (although the presence/absence of Technicolor is thematically important in their other previous colour film *A Matter of Life*

and Death). Dilip Rai and Mr. Dean each refer to Jesus Christ as a man, although Sister Clodagh tells the young General that Christ merely ‘took the shape of a man’, while the internal rupture suffered by the Sisterhood is bought about in part by the frustrations of their required celibacy. Polarisations of any sort are thus complicated. And while the story clearly suggests that the crisis suffered at Mopu is caused by pagan or supernatural forces (emphasised in the metaphor of the wind which cannot be kept out of the palace, and the statues which decorate it), the key struggle we see enacted is that between Sister Clodagh and her own unconscious. Consequently, Powell’s abandonment of ‘external reality’ is the visible register of the film’s narrative dispute with Western empiricism. In attacking the assumptions of Western superiority, it marks a decisive departure from an English philosophical and aesthetic position.

Powell and Pressburger’s characteristic ‘border crossings’ into alien territory are not directly analogous to their stylistic forays from realism into excess, although certainly the ‘alien’ space is connoted with the Imagination (as something existing beyond the empirically real). This is not just because the concept of excess is, as I have indicated, problematical in itself. It is also because their melodrama does not *simply* ground itself on a ‘home turf’ of realism and make guerrilla-like sorties into an ‘excessive’ terrain. *Black Narcissus* can hardly be said to do so, for in the main it eschews realism (although Mr. Dean is an embodiment of its values). The theoretical problem which inevitably returns is that of mapping any interior division: ‘excess’ is dubiously premised upon a clinical and quantifiable measurement of signification. Furthermore, classical realism, inasmuch as it denies internal contradiction, is antithetical to the full-bodied melodramatic mode we find in Powell and Pressburger. Rather than parading a classical structure, decorated (or marred) by worrying gargoyles of excess, this high-melodrama’s entire

edifice is rough-hewn - a distinctly un-classical Gothic. Recognisably realistic ingredients within it form part of its meaning, and its different discourses are, to follow Alan Sinfield's argument regarding dissident texts, confusedly and awkwardly bound up with each other. But semiotics is no precise science, and melodrama obeys no strict coding system. Deborah Linderman, charting how polyvocal and unstable moments of surplus inscription may be smuggled, like contraband, into classical film texts, remarks that once such evidence of textual repression or inconsistency has been located, the "tyranny of the signifier"⁶⁹ no longer holds sway: "Its heterogeneity recovered, the text has no final term: it is precisely interminable."⁷⁰

The same can be said about *Black Narcissus* which (despite its overarching design) parades heterogeneity, and the very interminability explains why the closure of the film, as so often with melodrama, seems inconclusive or unsatisfactory. *The Red Shoes* comments explicitly on the apparent insignificance which is allotted to the closure of the melodramatic plot-line. Recounting the story of 'The Red Shoes' to Julian, Lermontov dismisses the heroine's plight with a casual disregard. "Oh, in the end she dies," he tells him, with a wave of his hand (signalling a brusque indifference which after Vicky's death is deeply ironic). The 'composed' sequence which brings Ruth's death seems a highly wrought conclusion to the film. The final horrified close-up, showing Clodagh's appalled reaction to Ruth's fall, is a fitting culmination to the carefully mounting tension which has led to this disastrous moment. But so rapacious has Ruth's animated and warped desire been, that the subsequent coda is sensed to be insufficient. The chaste farewell between

⁶⁹ Deborah Linderman, 'Uncoded Images in the Heterogeneous Text', in Phillip Rosen (ed.) *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (Columbia University Press: London, 1986), p. 150.

⁷⁰ Linderman in Rosen (ed.), p. 144.

Clodagh and Mr. Dean is understated: any unspoken and unfulfilled desire is barely discernible. The descent from the precipice is a retreat back into the restrained mores of muted English realism. The backward-looking glance up to the frankly disastrous Palace of Mopu sees that alien territory fade into the clouds. But the need to look back at all is perhaps dubiously motivated - regret, submission, or nostalgia for its visceral riot are all to be read into the conclusion of the film.

How radical, then, is the film's melodrama? Laura Mulvey relishes the surfacing of ideological contradiction which she sees as the melodramatic form's defining trait. Such incoherences are, she suggests, writ large: they are not mystified in an ideological false consciousness (as is the case with the supposed objectivity of realism) but are proudly and plainly displayed. Of the family melodrama, she admits to a "dizzy satisfaction in witnessing the way that sexual difference under patriarchy is fraught, explosive and erupts dramatically into violence (particularly) within its own private stamping ground."⁷¹ She does, therefore, retain the concept of excess, although she jettisons the assumption (made for example by Nowell-Smith, and cited above) that melodrama is marked by a 'baseline' of realism interrupted by excessive bursts (it could be argued that this is a structural flaw in her model, for as I have said, excess *requires* something to exceed). Nevertheless, melodrama for Mulvey is a "a safety valve for ideological contradictions centred on sex and the family,"⁷² and she is right to underscore the crucial significance of the contradictory to the form.

⁷¹ Laura Mulvey, 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama', in Gledhill (ed.), p. 79.

⁷² Mulvey in Gledhill (ed.), p. 75.

I have said that the fact of being contorted into super-charged mise-en-scène (or music) critically qualifies the sense of fulfilment or catharsis which any siphoned-off 'hysterical' articulation might provide. Mulvey acknowledges at least the hint of redundancy or ineffectuality in this re-directed signification: thus a dominant female point-of-view produces what she refers to as "an excess which precludes satisfaction. If the melodrama offers a fantasy escape for the identifying women in the audience, the illusion is so strongly marked by recognisable, real and familiar traps that the escape is closer to a daydream than a fairy story."⁷³ The unsustainability of *St. Faith's*, marked by Clodagh's failure to stop the wind from blowing, is never really in doubt, and nor do we really expect either Ruth or Clodagh to win the heart of Mr. Dean. The possibility which the gift of the Palace seemed to offer, of course, ends up shrouded in mist as a 'natural order' (signified by the coming of the rains) is restored.

Mulvey's focus on contradiction reminds us that melodrama deals with problems-within-structures. It may well construct what purports to be coherent, but it simultaneously nods towards the cracks in what it builds, and in this it enacts a possibly progressive and sophisticated double mission. Such a category of film-making was singled out by Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni in a much-cited editorial from *Cahiers du Cinéma* delineating categories of films according to the degree to which they comply/resist dominant ideology.⁷⁴ The authors' fifth category accounts for those works which "seem at first to belong firmly within the ideology and to be completely under its sway, but which

⁷³ Mulvey in Gledhill (ed.), p. 79.

⁷⁴ Jean-Luc Comolli & Jean Narboni, 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism', reprinted in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods: An Anthology* (University of California Press Ltd: London, 1976). The article was originally printed in *Cahiers du Cinéma* (no. 216, October 1969).

turn out to be so only in ambiguous manner.”⁷⁵ Such a film is fragmented by its own internal criticism, with the dominant ideology simultaneously presented and undone by the text. All melodrama can fit this definition, although it is the form of family melodrama produced in Hollywood in the 1950s which has most thoroughly been critiqued along the lines set out by Comolli and Narboni.

It is worthwhile hazarding a distinction between this Hollywood form and works such as *Black Narcissus*, although no clean line exists between Powell and Pressburger's brand of quasi-Victorian 'operatic' melodrama and the more fragmented American product. This said, the Hollywood form does operate within what appears to be a largely realistic frame, with heightened moments marking points where the conventions of realism collapse. An irresolvable discrepancy between two antithetical modes (an order which fails to recognise the significance of 'feelings' versus an emotional/fantastical register which 'reality' cannot accommodate) creates a tension - one which in the case of Douglas Sirk, for example, is answered through authorial irony. Indeed, irony marks the dominant discourse of much Hollywood melodrama. Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959) offers a fractured narrative and a contradictory closure of deeply qualified catharsis (Mulvey's sense of 'precluded satisfaction'). It seems to conform to the values of the dominant social order, and to shore up the institution of the family, while in fact it cynically undermines that very system. Fetishised images of success, and utopian signs of achievement are presented, but faith in their veridical nature is simultaneously negated. The refusal of the narrative to iron out this contradiction marks its departure from traditional classic realism. With Sirk it is a measure of his commitment to Brechtian

⁷⁵ Comolli & Narboni (1976), p. 27.

techniques - alienation devices which work by separating out elements of production rather than by melding them together, by laying bare (although in Sirk's case, only partially) the artifice of the work.

Inasmuch as it invests human activity and human feeling with significance in a post-religious order, Sirk's melodrama can, like Powell and Pressburger's, be seen as a descendent of the nineteenth century form. The gospel singing which figures so strongly in the closing reel of *Imitation of Life*, for example, registers a passionate striving for the metaphysical, or the sacred, which jars with the highly materialistic world of the film. It is also an appeal to what might be called 'folk culture' as an authentic alternative to commodified artifice. But if Sirk aims to expose, through irony, cracks in the dominant bourgeois ideology, *Black Narcissus* strives instead to amplify its visceral impact. In British cinema history, David Lean's *Brief Encounter* could, cursorily, be said to deploy its conflicting discourses along what might be recognised as Sirkian lines, for this film ironically pits Rachmaninov against 'Received Pronunciation', and its tragic structure of feelings derives from the yawning chasm between the late-Romantic score and its protagonist's internalised inability either to achieve or to express the feelings and desires which the extra- (and intra-) diegetic soundtrack so glaringly recommends. Thus, to return to the symphonic set of metaphors which opened this chapter, and which were so persuasively put forward by Abel Gance, while the film language of the Sirkian mode is a kind of ironic counterpoint, orchestrating dissonance to subvert the ideological conformity of his broadly realistic milieu, the Archers' depart more fundamentally from the constraints of realism to create a close-harmony of visual and aural codes, sustaining the intensity by avoiding any relapse into the more ordered regime of realism. If Sirkian melodrama's defining structure is antithesis (discordance), Powell's is, as I have argued,

synthesis (concordance), the coming together of a variety of super-charged modes of expression. Hence the conclusion of *Black Narcissus* is, in Powell's words, "music, emotion, image and voices all blended together into a new and splendid whole."⁷⁶ What brought critical opprobrium upon Powell and Pressburger was the set of moral imperatives endorsing the notion of British cinematic realism (such imperatives also decried the apparently celebratory notion of 'excess' which is its supplement). If post-war Britain is characterised by prudence and sobriety, by rationing and rationalisation, then their Technicolor work revels in immoderacy, in a conspicuous stylistic consumption which borders on the gluttonous. Powell's Romantic lust for the totality of a 'new and splendid whole' is itself an omnivorous admission. Organicity is his goal, but as he admits in the statement of his which heads this chapter, the 'composed film' (his ideally achieved totality) was something he achieved only with the stylistically coherent fantasy of *The Tales of Hoffmann*.⁷⁷

5.1.3: Consuming Spectacles: a Cinema of Attractions

I wish to close my examination of unity and fragmentation in the Technicolor melodramas by isolating and highlighting one further element. It is a characteristic which has been touched upon already, in various guises and contexts. Whether considered in terms of flamboyant mise-en-scène, of singular, highly-charged pieces of symbolism, or of consciously Expressionist outbursts, their cinema can be seen as one of "attractions" (the

⁷⁶ Powell (1992), p. 583.

⁷⁷ Powell (1992), p. 581.

phrase is Tom Gunning's, although, as he acknowledges, it borrows from Eisenstein).⁷⁸ By this, I mean that it often commits itself to spectacle - and that the presentation and appreciation of its spectacular 'parts' seems (sometimes) more important than the teleology of its narrative 'whole'. It is obviously too tidy to separate out these ingredients entirely; still less to ascribe divided responsibility for them to Powell (the visualiser) and Pressburger (the story-teller). Just as their creative functions coalesce and synergise each other, so too are the textual elements of spectacle and narrative in intimate dialogue with each other. Laura Mulvey's writing on the objectification of women in classical cinema makes a memorably neat and profitable separation between these elements in the name of theory and of lucid polemic, but within traditional narrative film, no image is utterly detached or 'non-narrative' (even within surrealist film, where the strategy might have greater purchase, the urge to bind the heterogeneous or extraneous image into some ordered syntagma is inevitable).⁷⁹ While the drive towards unity is palpable in the melodramas, even if it vies with readings which doggedly mine the genre for signs of internal cleavage, the tendency to parenthesise certain key moments, scoring them consciously for our delectation, is clearly there. Such moments almost achieve self-sufficiency. It happens throughout their work.

For example, *Sister Briony* shows a glass vessel to the camera. She crumbles some powder into the clear liquid it contains. This liquid spontaneously turns a deep, gorgeous violet. The assembled peasants who work General Todo Rai's mountain estate

⁷⁸ Tom Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde', in Thomas Elsaesser (ed.) *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (B.F.I. Publishing: London, 1990). Gunning has also written on the cinema of attractions in ' "Now You See It, Now You Don't": The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions', in Richard Abel (ed.) 1996.

⁷⁹ Mulvey (1989).

gaze, and gasp and are unanimously agog. There are two important dimensions to this admittedly brief moment in *Black Narcissus*. One concerns the way the colour change is perceived; the other, more relevant to my present argument, pertains to the meaning of the ‘act of displaying’ itself.

To the fascinated, superstitious peasants, what Sister Briony has done is magic. Doubtless, to those of *us* well-schooled in science, it is a demonstration of a simple and predictable chemical reaction. At any rate, it is also like a magic *trick*. There is an important power-play consequent upon which of these readings we prefer. Briony is ‘showing’ the natives the inexplicable wonders of the West - to advertise her new hospital - and in doing so she assumes a metaphysical role. Like the inhabitants of Plato’s cave, the gullible peasants must necessarily embrace the *alchemical* reading, for they lack any frame of reference to account otherwise for what they have witnessed. It is a metaphor for the cinematic experience, as it has often been conceptualised. Certainly, the function of Briony’s display is to bolster the status of the hospital, and to excite faith in the capacity of medicine, and this it achieves (however much the achievement is undercut by the revelation that the natives are being paid by the General to attend the clinic). What gives the scenario resonance, however, is our own pleasurable recognition that we have a superior comprehension of what has been shown. We even enjoy a number of simultaneous decodable options. We half-remember our childhood chemistry sets, and know that a scientific explanation is out there, should we feel moved to find it. We also recognise both the liquid’s transformation and Briony’s performance as stock ingredients in a variety magician’s routine. There are parallels here with the interplay of historical factors which fed the blurred aetiology of the new cinematic medium: part empirical tool and part ‘magic’; part enlightenment and part downright deception. The various strands

which came together to constitute what is called cinema had their points of origin in wildly divergent cultural spheres, and what was forged by their association was a bastard medium, unsure of its parenthood yet betraying its features confusedly. In Briony's little narrative, something of this 'mixed bag' can be detected.

The expression 'magic trick', of course, contains an internal contradiction. The adjective touches on the marvellous, but the noun it attends smells of stratagems, fraudulence and cheating (after all, the words trickery and treachery share the same root). The enjoyment of the magic trick blankets over this contradiction. It is an act of disavowal. Seeing is believing, even when unbelievable, because we will it to be so. This qualified structure of belief radically alters the basic relationship between the audience and the performance. If 'classical' films suture their readers by provoking narrative curiosity (and granting them an illusory mastery over the plot), the text nevertheless remains an objective and extant artefact. In theatrical terms, the proscenium arch and the fourth wall screen off the possibility of real interaction with the viewer: the diegesis of the film is, in effect, hermetically sealed, stable and coherent. It is the recipient of a voyeuristic gaze. When, however, the act of showing is itself the motivation, and the point of the film is *that it is shown*, the situation alters, because the agency of the film-maker is ever present. Sister Briony, now a vaudevillian, is here the film-maker's representative within the diegesis. Rather than depending on curiosity, the key factor now is surprise. The viewer has no mastery over the object, and a showman is in control. In Gunning's words, "the attraction invokes an exhibitionist rather than a voyeuristic regime."⁸⁰ Briony's exhibition for the natives well illustrates the idea of attractions because, in this instance, her gesture

⁸⁰ Gunning (1996), p. 75.

of display actually frames the attraction, self-consciously dramatising it and calling attention to it with a “Hey Presto!” The attraction need not be so explicitly underscored, nor need the showmanship be diegeticised: the invitation to wonder at spectacle is all that is required.

The form of ‘attraction’ which Gunning writes of had its heyday, he suggests, in early cinema, when projected moving images retained a sense of novelty and were intrinsically fascinating. This cinema, predating the hegemonic rise of narrative film, should be seen “less as a way of telling stories than as a way of presenting a series of views to an audience, fascinating because of their illusory power.”⁸¹ The role of the showman-exhibitor was still vital. Gunning argues that what is significant about this hitherto under-appreciated or misunderstood cinema is that it “directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle - a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself.”⁸² To précis his history, between 1906 and 1913, cinema became more thoroughly narrativised. Gunning notes the influence of D. W. Griffith and the appeal of ‘legitimate’ theatre as a source of those narratives as factors in the development. The attractions (the term invokes more ‘vulgar’ pursuits such as the amusement arcade, fairgrounds and variety theatre) did not disappear, of course. They interacted with narrative cinema and found a place within what became the ‘classical model’. Some popular cinematic genres since have shown a greater sense of ‘display’: the musical, where performance bursts out of the storyline; the horror film, where we are dared to ‘see’ the monster; and more recently, the

⁸¹ Gunning (1990), p. 57.

⁸² Gunning (1990), p. 58.

action-movie, where ‘special effects’, descendants of the original early attractions, are a ‘be all and end all’, pinned to a cursory narrative.

Powell’s persona has as much to do with the ‘impresario’ as it has to do with story-telling (if we can make a neat distinction between the two roles). There is a palpable sense of self-satisfied glee in some of his more elaborate visual set-pieces, and the quasi-magical, ‘artist figure’ in his and Pressburger’s films commands the sense of authority which the dazzled spectator of attractions concedes to the ‘genius’ who has produced them. This is a chief creative tension in the films: their ‘exhibitionist’ quality promotes the pre-eminence of the ‘artist’ (and there is an aristocratic quality coursing through them); yet the attractions they illustrate derive from cinema’s roots in popular culture and are moments of trickery. Colpeper, of course, embodies this dilemma. He is a feudal overload and is something else: at best a well-meaning charlatan or a cheap huckster; at worst, a perverted molester.

Eisenstein originally wanted the attraction to assault the audience. He argues that the effect of attractions in theatre (the medium in which he first worked through the concept) is to shock: “An attraction”, he writes, “is any aggressive moment in theatre, i.e. any element of it that subjects the audience to emotional or psychological influence ... These shocks provide the only opportunity of perceiving the ideological aspect of what is being shown.”⁸³ In his original context, the attraction is an avant-garde tactic of *agit* theatre, akin to Brecht’s. Gunning’s appropriation of the term loses some of the radicalism: shocks often become surprises; spectators are more likely to be entranced by the illusionism as to be shaken out of a false consciousness. The end may be pleasure in

⁸³ Sergei M. Eisenstein, *Selected Works: Volume One: Writings 1922-34* (B.F.I. Publishing: London, 1988), p. 34.

itself - and the depoliticisation here has to do with the cinema's status as a popular cultural form which arguably replaces the true Eisensteinian 'attraction' with a more regressive 'distraction'. Nevertheless, in the feature film, the cinematic attraction still stands proud of its narrative.

Surprising visual effects are something of an Archers trademark. The staircase in *A Matter of Life and Death* is emblematic of the trait, and the Corryvreckin whirlpool in *I Know Where I'm Going!* invites a similarly 'amazed' reaction. They are knitted into their respective narratives, yet are self-evidently impressive. Other key visual moments drawing on expressionist rhetoric have a psychologising function. Both *Contraband* and *The Small Back Room* feature such sequences. The depth (of characterisation) which such attractions offer exists alongside the surface enjoyment of the spectacle: in a dialectic of time and space, they advance the narrative and are also pure exhibition. The narrative of *Bluebeard's Castle*, Powell's film of Bartok's opera, is structured entirely around a sequence of attractions. In Powell's rendition it is given an un-mapped and disorienting studio setting, and designed by Hein Heckroth its 'subjective' use of space reminds the viewer of 'The Red Shoes' ballet sequence. "An opera about a curious woman", as its opening title advertises, it replaces stage action with a series of spectacular epiphanies, as Bluebeard's new bride Judit persuades her secretive husband to unlock each of seven doors in his castle. The revelations of what are behind the doors recalls the sweeping gesture which opened the vast double doors at the Palace of Mopu in *Black Narcissus*. The 'magic spaces' beyond these doors represent, in a gothic mode, partitioned areas of Bluebeard's psyche. Judit is ultimately enshrined behind the last door, whose chamber contains the entombed memories of Bluebeard's dead wives. Like Lermontov in the final shot of him in *The Red Shoes*, Bluebeard is left alone, gazing in the shadows. *Bluebeard's*

Castle is a remarkably static opera (rarely staged because of this lack of action). For much of its duration it is a frozen tableau. The spectacle tends towards stasis, arresting plot dynamics for contemplative speculation. In *A Canterbury Tale*, the narrative itself decelerates to dwell on its chief static symbol, the cathedral. This is talked about as a site/sight, to be ‘taken in’ by visitors, and we see it being captured on Sgt. Roczinsky’s movie-camera (foregrounding the way tourism has since commodified heritage). The film takes the very stasis of the spectacle itself as a metaphor for its endorsement of permanence over the superficial rush of modernity: the attraction, in other words, determines the narrative.

Returning to the post-war melodramas, the psychological significance of their visuals has been established, but the degree to which they rely on moments of ‘display’ needs elaborating. Throughout *Black Narcissus* we are shown static visual images. Photographs and sketches of Mopu, and a first montage visit to the General’s estate, detach us from the narrative time of the film’s opening sequence. Other pictures - close-up shots of paintings from the days of the “House of Women” and from Sister Philippa’s book of gardening, are enjoyed by their diegetic spectators, while the Palace itself, and vertiginous high-angle shots looking down the precipice from above the Palace bell, memorably fascinate the cinematic spectator. There are difference in degree here, to be sure, but the emphasis given to the displaying of Philippa’s floral beds, and to the visible license of the old General’s concubines, marks them out as moments of spectacle. If the entire set of Mopu and the trick shots which render it so ‘believable’ are the chief attraction of the film, this corroborates the argument that *Black Narcissus* is a bravura performance. The set celebrates the potential of cinema and departs from any notion of realism which favours the signified over the signifier. Within the gothic set, displays of

the human body are also vital. Occasionally these displays mark narrative pauses, as characters break out into dance: Angu Ayah skips around a pool, while Kanchi's highly sexual dance, which seems to draw the Young General to her, is a remarkably choreographed piece of exhibitionism and narcissism (we see her admiring herself in a mirror).

Gender is particularly salient here, for the politics of spectacle inevitably impinges on images of women. *Black Narcissus* and *The Red Shoes* use dramatic close-ups of women: Clodagh, Ruth and Vicky all memorably face the camera at moments of intense psychological excitement. Such close-ups - particularly the images of Vicky as she dances 'The Red Shoes' and just before she runs to her death - so directly confront the camera that they violate any fourth wall, destroying the distance between spectator and object, and encouraging an intimate identification with her horror. Laura Mulvey has remarked how close-up images of objectified women detach from their diegesis, and how under the star system in particular, "the image of woman was conflated with the commodity spectacle."⁸⁴ The cinema of attractions advertises itself through its fetishized objects. The star close-up is not simply an innocent image of a woman but is a commodification, transforming the depiction into a valorized fetish.

Of course, the women's picture is addressed to a female audience. These women, in the era of consumerism, are also constructed as purchasers, and they are encouraged to buy the images of women on offer. It is no surprise, therefore, that any such commodification in the women's film is often built around costume and cosmetics. In *Black Narcissus* the most flagrantly *objectified* image is that of Ruth in her red dress, the

⁸⁴ Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (B.F.I. Publishing: London, 1996), p. 41.

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consumerism,” she concedes, “involves the idea of the self-image.”⁸⁶ To this end, cinematic images are not neutral images of pro-filmic events but are wares for sale, attracting our curiosity. Powell and Pressburger’s dazzlingly self-reflexive cinema is not only conscious of this, but flaunts it. In an instructive metaphor, Doane remarks that “the film frame functions ... not as a ‘window in the world’ ... but as a quite specific kind of window - a shop window.”⁸⁷ Vicky, noticing a pair of innocent red shoes for sale, sees her imaginary double displayed, dancing in the Shoemaker’s shop window. This double, clad specifically in a *classical* tutu, is an ideal, and Vicky’s relationship to it parallels the audience’s relationship to Vicky (anecdotally, of course, the film impelled a generation of hopeful girls to take up the ballet). Joining Lermontov’s troupe, though, Vicky is just a commodity. However well it is appreciated, a commodity has no intrinsic value, for value is marked upon it, just as Vicky’s worth is written onto her by Lermontov (her family name ‘Page’ suggests a blank surface, ready to be inscribed). The plot of ‘The Red Shoes’ ballet anticipates that the dancer will become literally and inseparably identified from the demonised commodities she has purchased. When Vicky is finally erased, the ballet with which she has been so identified is performed without her, the white disc of a spotlight describing where she might be on the Monte Carlo stage (the same spotlight had earlier trapped Lermontov on stage as he addressed the theatre audience, unwillingly forced to make a spectacle of himself). The point, of course, is that the film never permitted Vicky’s subjectivity to establish itself. She is granted no unqualified expression of inherent worth. Her objectivity has been mistaken for autonomy. While, ambiguously, dance is an expression of her self and her spirit (this could be termed the

⁸⁶ Doane in Belton (ed.), p. 128.

⁸⁷ Doane in Belton (ed.), p. 128.

'Romantic' interpretation), it has also been stressed that ballet has silenced, choreographed and idealised her out of existence, and the space on the stage is merely an admission of what has been implicit all along. With a final twist, and despite its deeply negative meanings, the empty space is also another advertisement, this time for a vacancy, as Massine's final offer of the red shoes to the aspiring young spectator makes clear. Like attractions, the devil tempts us, and as Raymond Durnat has written "reconciliation with the diabolical is, indeed, an underlying lietmotif (sic) in Powell's films."⁸⁸ The image of the red shoes lingers. They spread like open wounds bleeding over the screen and threatening to engulf the theatre, seducing the spectator into a genuinely alien territory. Any catharsis gained by Vicky's tragic last leap is at best neutralised by the demonic invitation to the dance.

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In Marxist terms, it is also a characteristic of the commodity that it denies the effort which produced it. The process of production (wherein commodity value actually resides) fails to mark itself on the object it has made, and instead the commodity enters into a system of exchange which instead determines its worth. In Laura Mulvey's words, the successful commodity "depends upon the erasure of the marks of production, any trace of indexicality, the grime of the factory ... and most of all, the exploitation of the worker. Instead the commodity presents the market with a seductive sheen, as it competes to be desired."⁸⁹ I would like to argue tentatively that *The Red*

⁸⁸ Durnat, p. 214.

⁸⁹ Mulvey (1996), p. 4.

Shoes enacts a parable of this system. Just before ‘curtain up’, Lermontov is complimented that he is a magician for making “it all look so easy.” The commodity spectacle which is the film’s chief attraction, namely ‘The Red Shoes’ ballet, is then presented as a perfect, dazzling art-piece, a high-gloss performance which is pure image, cut loose from its conditions of manufacture. When it assumes a transcendent, mythological status, what the Ballet actually does is disavow the graft which contrived it. This is only one half of the argument, for clearly the film’s back-stage sequences extensively cover an arduous rehearsal period. Even Lermontov, otherwise so seemingly invested with Romantic, mythical qualities, twice reminds us of the material nature of what is being created: he tells Vicky that the great dancer’s semblance of ease is the result of an excess of effort, and denies that he is a magician on the grounds that (as I mentioned earlier) no rabbit can be pulled from a hat unless “there is already a rabbit in the hat.” The ambiguity in the film is that while the knowledge of art’s materiality is expressed, so too is faith in the metaphysical. This, though, is the point about fetishism: it disavows knowledge in favour of belief, and Powell and Pressburger continue to be besotted with just that belief system. While we may have seen how the ballet is fabricated within the diegesis, the filmic rendition of ‘The Red Shoes’ performance supplements that toil with a battery of cinematic effects. Replete with transformations and impossible occurrences, it leaves its theatrical locus, and is marked as magic. Admittedly it shifts into a world of pure subjectivity (Vicky’s), but it simultaneously enters a world of pure cinema.

The spectacular elements in Powell and Pressburger’s films mark a longing for plenitude. Like the sublime landscape, they aim for transcendence. Tom Gunning’s study of the cinema of attractions concludes that “rather than a purely passive recording of theatrical acts of slices of life, we see that the act of display in early film also carried at least the possibility of an experience of

a time of pure instance.”⁹⁰ The detached temporality, and the elision of space between subject and object effected by the intimate close-up shot, allow for the immediate fulfilment of the senses. As Powell makes clear, “We were all fascinated by the direct approach of the camera to action, by the *huge emotion* that could be aroused by a close-up” (my emphasis)⁹¹ The intensification brought by Technicolor and by music bolsters the fetishised image.

The rhetoric of the ‘quality’ British critics is directly opposed to attractions on a number of grounds. It is worth reminding ourselves of the key terms these critics use. Among the pre-requisites which John Ellis singles out in his analysis of this discourse are “organic unity”, “flow” and “the truth of the real”.⁹² Given the value which Powell accorded to ‘organic unity’ it is surprising this feature did not ingratiate him with the critics. Extracting from critical comments, Ellis singles out the opinion that film should “move according to some sort of design.”⁹³ Works are praised in which the director “has used no sight, no sound, however brief, which is not germane to his overall purpose.”⁹⁴ Powell would, we imagine, agree, although in the post-war work this striven for ‘unity’ is something which he achieves only in films such as *Black Narcissus* and, more thoroughly, *The Tales of Hoffmann*. As this chapter has charted, the journey towards organic unity is part of Powell’s Romantic rhetoric, where *Gesamtkunstwerk* characteristics are clearly to the fore. More often, displays and spectacles puncture the holistic unity of his films.

⁹⁰ Gunning (1996), p. 83.

⁹¹ Powell (1992), p. 260.

⁹² John Ellis, ‘The Quality Film Adventure: British Critics and the Cinema 1942-1948’, in Andrew Higson (ed.) *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema* (Cassell: London, 1996), p. 76.

⁹³ Taken from excerpted reviews quoted in Ellis, p. 76.

⁹⁴ Quoted in Ellis, p. 76.

The Red Shoes's collision of styles illustrates this. The critics promptly noted this as a flaw, with one reviewer admitting to being left "with a slightly dazed sense of returning from some strange exotic nether regions. This is caused by the mixture of styles ... and by the episodic nature of the story, but even more by the flamboyance of its spectacle, combined with the almost brutal insistence on backstage atmosphere."⁹⁵

The critics fondness for the 'truth of the real' is at odds with the ambience of Imagination and the modern self-reflexivity which Powell and Pressburger's cinema so often conjures. Additionally, the approval of 'flow' (which is conflated with 'logic') vies with the stasis of spectacle. Commodities, displaying their delights in the present; they exist to be consumed. Classical narratives conversely operate a principle of deferred pleasure. Satisfaction is puritanically withheld for the dénouement, whereas the cinema of attraction advertises itself as one of immediate, carnivalesque indulgence.

"Strange exotic nether regions" perplexed the worried critic of *The Red Shoes*. This film displays exotic attractions *con brio*. Returning to Gunning's cinematic history, such attractions are deemed to be the ghosts of earlier proletarian forms of 'entertainment' (itself a concept often frowned upon). Roller-coasters, fairground side-shows and circus acts (alluded to in 'The Red Shoes' ballet sequence) are paralleled and perpetuated in narrative cinema's attractions. Together with the sensationalist aspects of popular melodrama, this vulgarity presents the middle-class, patrician critical voices with a disarming encounter with an 'Other'. Where these moments have the taint of the 'foreign' - as in the expressionistic elements in Powell and Pressburger's work - they are doubly suspicious, and they bring into play a nationalistic set of critical imperatives. They are constructed as being out of place in British Cinema, because the model of cinema which is

⁹⁵ Quoted in Ellis. p. 77.

invoked is a restrictive one. The stylistic and narrative outbursts in Powell and Pressburger's work certainly do betray Continental influences. They often mark a Romantic resistance to both the prescriptive 'realist' model of national cinema and to more parochial or phobic forms of national identity. They are also gaudy spectacles which remember cinema's often unhallowed, lowborn past. They are remnants of an aesthetic of vulgarity. One man's visionary Romanticism is another's effective showmanship. In Powell and Pressburger's films, both are displayed with a sheen of cinematic panache.



6: CONCLUSION

Abandoned Consensus - The Post-War Position

National Identities

At the end of *The Tales of Hoffmann*, Sir Malcom Sargent puts down his baton. Closure is then achieved when the traditional words “The End” are superimposed by a rubber stamp which abruptly marks the phrase “Made in England” on the cover of Sir Malcom’s musical score. This is an ambiguous image. It is an expression of national pride, and yet of course it contains a strong element of irony. Offenbach was French, Hoffmann German. Few of the film’s leading players are English (even Moira Shearer is Scottish). Among the technical crew, Hein Heckroth’s contribution as designer is to the fore, and he too, of course, was German. Powell clearly felt compelled forcibly to impress a signifier of Englishness on the work. In doing so he chose an insignia which we tend to associate with the world of mass production and consumption. He did so in a comic vein: the rubber stamp is the culminating visual joke of the film. These points raise interesting questions of motivation, and they are implicated with wider problems of national identity and culture, illustrating something of the state of Britain and British cinema at the mid point of the 20th century.

This thesis opened by outlining some questions appropriate to the study of film and country, and addressed the idea that concepts such as nationhood and national identity are settled *ideologically*. To reiterate in summary, what is vital about this theoretical line is that it de-

essentialises what is often presented as a highly mythological and natural state of being. When a sense of national identity thoroughly achieves a hegemonic status, not only are the borders of the nation psychologically secured, but the State and its population seem to find a settled and reciprocally rewarding relationship. Of course, that relationship is in reality one of perpetual renewal or renegotiation: it is a defining characteristic of hegemony that its consensus requires an ongoing surveillance, and that forces of resistance or subversion be acknowledged, neutered, or otherwise bought off.

The discourse of national identity is, of course, closely connected with that of *nationalism*, although my Introduction sought also to open up a space between these concepts, to separate the language of Englishness from the vociferations of English nationalist bullishness. We can define nationalism as a set of practices which defines and advances a nation-state, and as such it is open for appropriation by groups of various political hues, and may be deployed to various political ends. It will be useful to identify the form it takes in Powell and Pressburger's work, for in a sense they are mindful of borders; yet in another they are oblivious of them, refusing any process of crude "othering". Anthony Smith discerns two kinds of historical nationalism, which he labels ethnocentric and polycentric. "The former or 'weaker' kind was a movement of resistance to foreign rule in order to preserve the groups' culture and freedom. The outsider was the 'barbarian', the 'heathen'; and value pertained only to one's own group and its gods. The 'polycentric' kind of nationalism sees the world as divided into nations, or collective individualities. Each with its own value, each requiring a state of its own to realise its communal potential and sovereign autonomy, and each seeking to join the 'family of nations' by contributing its peculiar experiences to a common fund of humanity."¹ The Anglophile Pressburger and the

¹ Quoted in Stephen Haseler, *The English Tribe: Identity, Nation and Europe* (Macmillan: London, 1996). p.68.

cosmopolitan internationalist Powell clearly acknowledge national differences, and make forays across frontiers, but the nationalism they conceive of clearly belongs with the second of Smith's categories. Foreign traditions can be quizzed, other lands can be investigated and celebrated: whatever their personal politics, Powell and Pressburger are not jingoistic.

Where, though, are they to be positioned within the Britain of the post-war decade, and how does this position differ from that they experienced during the war years? First we should recollect the conditions of 1940-1945, when the war-time coalition government oversaw the promulgation of that tightly drawn rhetoric of the Peoples war. How was that sense of shared endeavour fostered? How were differences of class, and of political position subsumed within a higher national discourse? By appealing to national identities, and by encouraging the active participation in the war effort, the interests of the individual, his/her social group and the State were seen to coalesce mythically, and this rhetoric was strengthened because it drew on deeply felt modes of national identification. *Blimp's* destruction of Candy's private space and its recruitment of 'Johnny' to the war effort, Theo's fondness for the English countryside, and *A Canterbury Tale's* excavation of 'Deep England' are part of Powell and Pressburger's contribution to this discourse. However, it was because of an expansive change in the dominant rhetoric of the nation that they found themselves chiming with the mainstream at this point in their careers. The culture they represent was part of a traditional romantic-pastoral one, often one of the fringes. In the war years, the dominant culture embraced it: the mountain came to Mohammed.

This is so because, despite the rather hawkish and old-guard militarism associated with the Prime Minister (who famously fought against the release of *Blimp*), the National Government successfully stretched its appeal to encompass and to motivate as wide a cross-section of the

population as possible. By making these appeals it sought to establish itself, and the war effort, in a truly hegemonic position. Overriding politically partisan differences, the Government became equated with the State, the State with its population: this act of incorporation (to adapt Raymond Williams term detailed in chapter 3.1) is a necessary precondition to hegemony. As Chantal Mouffe's analysis of Gramsci spells out, the securing of hegemony involves "a complete fusion of economic, political, intellectual and moral objectives" - a condition which results in what Gramsci himself termed "intellectual and moral unity."² The ideology of Britain at war, founded as it was upon terms such as unity, common direction, shared interest and the relegation of the private in favour of the public, achieved an astonishing centrality and strove to forge that sense of oneness. It was obviously not universal, as history records markers of dissent, yet the discourse nevertheless held together, and the *myth* of universality was kept aloft. And the themes which this ideology chose to valorise (either explicitly or implicitly) were close to Powell and Pressburger: the pastoral; the anti-materialistic; the group; the tolerance of foreigners; the insignificance of class. In short, the State co-opted traditional Romantic values as part of mythologising propaganda.

At this most important stage in their career, therefore, Powell and Pressburger are in harmony with national discourse (despite Churchill's wrath). How can this fact be squared with the critical disparagement which they sometimes received? There is an element of short-hand here, for as I have discussed earlier, the quality critics' disquiet at Powell and Pressburger was in

² Chantal Mouffe, 'Hegemony and ideology in Gramsci' in Chantal Mouffe (ed.) *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* (Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1979), p. 181.

reality only ever partial. Critical objection, where it was attracted, was generally limited to an aesthetic dislike for the non-realistic in their work. It is a matter of style, and it results from the critical machinery's attempts to standardise a distinctively 'national' cinema. This standardisation resulted in the critical construct I have referred to throughout this thesis as 'Classic British Cinema.' It was, though, always a selective model, founded on an admiration for the best of the British documentary movement. This is an understandable admiration, but as a basis for defining national cinema it is misplaced. Histories of cinema which have either overlooked or celebrated Powell and Pressburger (because of their deemed marginality) do so because they have internalised the parameters of the debate established by the quality critics of the 1940s. It might be added that academic institutions have either perpetuated or redressed this situation, recovering the Archers' reputations or re-drawing the map, and this is to be applauded. However, as long as they persist in teaching Powell and Pressburger within tidily modularised courses labelled 'British Cinema', they are in danger of overlooking the most significant gauntlet which these filmmakers throw down. 'National cinema' is a problematic, not a classification, creating as many questions as answers.

Romantic Resistance

In the post-war period, Powell and Pressburger seem to chase different goals. Their energies are expended in the direction of 'Art'. This is seen mainly in *The Red Shoes* and their filmed opera pieces, but also there in the formal, aesthetic concerns in *Black Narcissus*. Energies are also spent shoring up (or excavating) the Officer classes in military exercises such as *Ill Met by Moonlight*

and *Battle of the River Plate*. The change in direction is, though, more apparent than real: they were always cine-poets, consistently committed to romantic-transcendent values, and their commitment to recording contemporary social reality was only ever tenuous (the magical elements in their recruitment documentary *The Volunteer* show where their interests lay - this film is discussed in chapter 3.2). For a while, though, these values had found a home within contemporary Britain. The utopian rhetoric of the war partially spilled over into the idealistic presentation of the Welfare state, but Powell and Pressburger's dialogue with this world seems half-hearted. It is in the light of Britain's post-war status on the international stage, its commitment to welfare-capitalism, and its attitude to both elite and mass cultural forms that the Archers' productions of the time need to be seen.

It is a period of transition, with residual and emergent social forms exerting pressure on the dominant ideological matrix. Internationally, the five years after Hiroshima saw independence for India and the establishment of two world super-powers. Yet elements within the British nation obtusely refused to acknowledge the global reality of the country's reduced status. Our stumbling through the Suez crisis in 1956 showed that the problem was not a temporary one - later, resistance to Europe would indicate that this more frontier-conscious 'ethnocentric' nationalism (to return to Antony Smith's term) has a strong foothold in our culture. In the late 'forties, Britain staked her place alongside the USA, a special relationship which to Britain was as destined and as real as the trans-Atlantic splicing of Peter to Alison in *A Matter of Life and Death*. Yet in reality this mind-set reveals what Stephen Haseler considers to be "a frozen Englishness,

representing little more than the modern remnants of the old imperial class.”³ We have encountered this myopia before: it is an ideological residuum and its name is Blimpishness.

If Britain’s global role was diminishing, the post-war Government still sought to articulate some of the hopes and ideals of war-time, and it was able to do so by finding a common currency between its agenda of wide reaching social reform and the universality associated with the rhetoric of war (the Beveridge report, of course, was published in 1942). 1945 was thus no radical turning point.⁴ The Labour front bench were, in the main, middle class custodians of an old order, pursuing a policy of welfare-capitalism which was often quite conservative (for example with regard to gender politics, as I have detailed in the Introduction to Section 5). ‘Welfare-capitalism’ of course, is itself an ideological coalition. It is a characteristic British compromise. Yoking together two distinct social arrangements, *it falls short of a socialist agenda*, endorsing wealth production, yet it offers a safety net to ameliorate the inevitable effects of capitalism, and so persuasive a combination was this that the mode of consensus politics established by this time lasted more or less intact through until the 1980s (it should be remembered here that although Labour lost the 1951 General election and Churchill was returned to Downing Street, more people actually voted Labour then than had done in 1945: there was no outright rejection of Labour’s policies among either the people or the governing classes). Peter’s throwaway admission in *A Matter of Life and Death* that he is “Labour by experience” is a revealing comment, expressing disenchantment with Old Tory values. He is a modern man. He embodies

³ Stephen Haseler, *The English Tribe: Identity, Nationalism and Europe* (Macmillan: Basingstoke, 1996), p. 65.

⁴ See Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1989), p. 16.

the continuum between the fighting values of the People's War and the policies of the emergent Labour Government.

Given the Archers' interest in 'elite' art forms, it is worth considering the State's attitude to the arts in the post-war period, for this was the period when state funding of the arts was established. This was another inheritance from the war years, for in 1940, the Committee for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) had been instigated. Its aims, broadly carried into the constitution of the Arts Council, were to preserve the highest standards in the arts, to provide opportunities for the people to enjoy the arts, and to encourage participation in the arts.⁵ Definitions of art have always been contentious. There was never any consideration of providing support for popular or 'folk' art forms. The thrust of the campaign was the popularisation of high culture. This was in accordance with the 'universalising' aspirations of government policy, yet it was only ever figured as a *trickle-down* phenomenon. Early on, the Arts Council lost the impetus for encouraging artistic activity. Its first priorities were the establishment of the Royal Opera House and the consolidation of the work of Sadler's Wells. As succinctly expressed by Alan Sinfield, "the traditional conception of 'high art' culture persisted, but now with state validation, within the story that it was for all the people."⁶ Coinciding with the Arts Council's establishment, the BBC opened its high brow Third Programme: again this was meant to make high culture popular, although popularity was something it never achieved. The audience clammering for good seats in the Gods in the opening sequence of *The Red Shoes* were the

⁵ See Harold Baldry, *The Case for the Arts* (Secker and Warburg: London, 1981), p. 13.

⁶ Sinfield, p. 53.

beneficiaries of this state funding: intellectuals and the middle classes. Notoriously, this film caused a popular rush of enthusiasm for ballet (the successful stage careers of Fonteyn and Shearer doubtless played their part too, but it was the film which popularised dance). The updating and translation of *Die Fledermaus* into *Oh...Rosalinda!!* can be seen in the same light, while Powell records that during early pre-production discussions regarding *Tales of Hoffmann* it was mooted that the audience would need some form of coda to “explain to them what they had seen. A sort of summing up.”⁷ A case can thus be made for saying that these (middle-brow) works mediated between the world of high and popular art, and that *The Red Shoes* at least achieved more than official policy did in effecting popular attitude to the arts (paradoxically, given the demonic power the film attributes to the arts!). The Archers’ artistic aspirations resisted the common denominator of the marketplace. Some of the tension of this cultural position is to be seen in Rank’s chilly attitude to the film. As an exemplary producer, mindful of the marketing of his product, Rank and John Davis lost faith in the work, and it was poorly distributed. Its ultimate popularity was thus hard won.

The importance of universality to official cultural policy in this period indicates a holistic view of society: it is not pluralistic; it is not truly democratic; it remains hierarchical; and what it does not recognise is an emergent consumer society, one which will demand popular culture along mass produced lines. This new world is one of advertising and Americanisation, one which Powell and Pressburger resist: the opening credits of *I Know Where I’m Going* mock this materialistic way of life, and Doctor Reeves in the courtroom sequence of *A Matter of Life and*

⁷ Michael Powell. *Million Dollar Movie* (Mandarin: London, 1993), p. 92.

Death is quick to express distaste of popular American music. All this suggests that Powell and Pressburger's 'artistic' work at this time accords with the State's attitude to the Arts. Certainly Powell's faith in his audience, and his willingness to bring self-consciously aesthetic strategies into commercial feature films, mirror the efforts of the Arts Council. What he is doing though, is stretching the capacity of a popular medium towards high art values, and he is doing so within the marketplace, without state support, and subject to the financial considerations of his producers.

I want to close by returning to *The Tales of Hoffmann*, and to consider the lack of any contemporary referents in that work, its banishment of reality, as a significant exclusion. The Archers had always been criticised for avoiding social themes, so this is nothing new (and indeed Offenbach's opera contains many themes which are echoed in Pressburger's own narratives). "The war's over boys - shoot the works."⁸ Such was Powell's instruction to Heckroth and his team during the production of *The Red Shoes*. The style then, was forged by what it was reacting against, and here, a context of austerity, rationing, queues for dull food, the black market and the persistence of social inequality cannot be ignored. It is a part of the bourgeois tradition of art that it is a marvellous sequestered thing, speaking utopian possibilities, but any expression of the transcendent is inevitably a telling indictment of that which it transcends. Powell and Pressburger's work is here part of a culture of middle class dissent, a resistance which rejects consumerism, materialism and industry in favour of social cohesion, even if the society which coheres is a hierarchical one. Chapter 3.2, which discussed *A Canterbury Tale*, placed that film's attitude

⁸ Powell, p. 316.

⁹ Haseler, p. 73.

to village Englishness within this tradition of middle class dissent. Colpeper's reign in the village is not toppled (he adapts to maintain his position), and that commitment to hierarchy is seen again in Powell and Pressburger's somewhat dispiriting (because not entirely successful) officer class war films at the end of their career. To the degree that Heaven in *AMOLAD* represents the bureaucratisation of society (an official monitoring and control of the masses), Peter's resistance to its rule marks him as another middle class dissenter. This anti-industrial tradition is rooted in the culture and ideology of Englishness. It is a gentleman culture, a squirarchical paternalism which, as Stephen Haseler argues, remained active within the nation, and was represented by the 'wet' Cabinet of old school ties which Margaret Thatcher tried to sweep away in the 1980s.⁹

As a critique of society, the dissenting tradition's roots are in Romanticism. In the twentieth century it has been seen in Fabianism, Modernism, Bloomsbury, Cambridge communists, CND, Green politics: across the political spectrum therefore. In her case studies of "Romantic Protest" in the post-war period, Meredith Veldman also makes a strong case for the fantasy literature of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. As critiques of contemporary society, Narnia and Middle-Earth are, for her, "essentially romantic, an assertion of the primacy of nonmaterial reality."¹⁰ In creating a world of nonmaterial reality, Powell and Pressburger were ably served by Hein Heckroth, of course. There is an ephemeral quality to his gauzes and his flickering lights, and the two-dimensional shapes he creates for the *Hoffmann* sets are light and airy. As Kevin

¹⁰ Meredith Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain: Romantic Protest, 1945 - 1980* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1994), p. 304.

¹¹ Kevin Macdonald, *Emeric Pressburger: The Life and Death of a Screenwriter* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 17.

Macdonald puts it in his biography of his grandfather Pressburger, “The quality of the Archers’ films, if it had not gone down, had changed. As they drew further away from the war, from the centre of gravity, the films became more diaphanous, less attached to the real world.”¹¹ We could read this as dispiriting, were it not for the fact that the mythic-romantic aspects of the films (even if it is just referred to as quirkiness) are what is now celebrated. But there is nevertheless something tragic about Hoffmann’s rejection of the real world and his total commitment to a world of art.

It is only by artificially stamping ‘Made in England’ on the film that its place within a national discourse can be secured. Released in 1951, it coincided with what was either a remarkable coda to the war and the first post-war government, or an auspicious anticipation of the modern Britain to come. Positioned at the midpoint of the century, the Festival of Britain was a genuinely Janus-like phenomenon. Marking the centenary of the Great Exhibition, and transformed to become a celebration of both the victory of 1945 and the post-war recovery, it was a stamp of confidence. Opinion was divided then, and has been since, as to what the meaning of the Festival was. Michael Frayn’s brilliantly perceptive account of it situates the Festival squarely within the culture of the Peoples’ War and the post-war discourse of unity, tying it to the “radical middle classes”, a sector of society he identifies as the Herbivores (as opposed to the Tory Carnivores, waiting to re-take power in 1951).¹² The Festival, for Frayn, was “the last, and

¹² Michael Frayn, ‘Festival’ in Michael Sissons and Phillip French (ed.) *Age of Austerity* (Hodder and Stoughton: London, 1963), p. 319.

virtually the posthumous, work of the Herbivore Britain of the BBC News, the Crown Film Unity, the sweet ration, the Ealing comedies, Uncle Mac.”¹³ It is easy to see how the very popular Festival was written of in this way. Revitalising the South Bank, the Festival created a public space in which groups collected nightly during the summer to dance by the Thames. Not surprisingly the Festival Committee was composed of the cultural elite: R.A. Butler, Sir Kenneth Clark, T.S.Eliot, John Gielgud, Sir Malcolm Sargent (the Archers’ collaborator for *Hoffmann*); and this group constructed a Festival which disseminated “education, ideas and tastes, generally held to be the preserve of the elites, to the people of Britain.”¹⁴

What the Festival also pointed towards, of course, was a new consumerist way of life, to suburban existence and to television. Cinema played a part in the Festival. The biopic of William Friese-Greene, *The Magic Box* (dir John Boulting) was made specially for it, marking Britain’s place in the invention of the medium. It is not a persuasive film, complacently relying on cameo appearances from British stars to foster audience interest and making exaggerated claims for Friese-Greene. Another film was made for the event, Humphrey Jennings’ last work, *Family Portrait*. Echoing his war-time films, he again offers a personal perspective of the nation, again in a romantic tone. If it has a valedictory feel it may be because of Jennings’ death in a car crash before the work was shown, but it seems part of an earlier world. The rubber stamp at the end of *Hoffmann* violently connects it with the Festival, and is a piece of protest. As a work made in

¹³ Frayn, p. 320.

¹⁴ Becky Conekin, ‘Here is the Modern World Itself: The Festival of Britain’s Representations of the Future’ in Becky Conekin, Frank Mort and Chris Waters (eds.) *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945 - 1964* (Rivers Oram Press: London, 1990), p. 234. As the title of her article indicates, Conekin emphasises the Modernist aspect of the Festival, particularly its stress on architecture and science.

Britain it might have been an imaginatively bold choice of official film for the Festival; an earlier part-fantasy, *AMOLAD*, had after all been thought fit to be selected for the Royal Film Performance.

Yet the Archer's are by now on the wane, and their position is precarious. The British film industry suffered because of quixotic government legislation and because of the vicissitudes of international commerce. The Archers were losing favour with their producers. They had only ever been truly central when their particular line of romantic international nationalism had accorded with the culture of the early and mid 'forties. Their attempts to incorporate elite art forms into a popular medium met halfway the State's wish to popularise high culture for the masses (and to emphasise the unifying, universalising rhetoric which had seen the Labour government sweep into power). The Film industry, though, never meeting with full State support, belonged to the market. The Archers' wish for creative freedom from their producers marks their Romantic desire to be shielded from this truth, and is part of a bourgeois tradition which can seem both self-indulgent and commercially untenable. It can also seem brave. Their art films plough their lonely furrow, and indicate a society prone to fragmentation, where the intellectual and moral unity which marked war-time national ideology (and which is the mythical goal of hegemony) has fallen away.



7: Filmography

This filmography gives details of all films cited in the thesis. It is arranged as follows:

1. Films crediting both Powell and Pressburger
2. Films directed by Powell without Pressburger
3. Films by other directors

Note: Comprehensive filmographies of Powell and Pressburger's work are provided in the following volumes:

Ian Christie, *Arrows of Desire: The Films of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1994)

James Howard, *Michael Powell* (London: BT Batsford Ltd, 1996)

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1. Films by Powell and Pressburger (all Great Britain productions)

The Battle of the River Plate. Written, Produced and Directed: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. 1956

Black Narcissus. Written, Produced and Directed: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. 1947

A Canterbury Tale. Written, Produced and Directed: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. 1944

Contraband. Producer: John Corfield. Director: Michael Powell. Original story and Screenplay: Emeric Pressburger. 1940

Elusive Pimpernel. Written and Directed: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. 1950

49th Parallel. Produced and Directed: Michael Powell. Original Story and Screenplay: Emeric Pressburger. 1941

Gone to Earth. Written, Produced and Directed: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. 1950.

I Know Where I'm Going!. Written, Produced and Directed: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. 1945

Ill Met by Moonlight. Written, Produced and Directed: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. 1957

The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp. Written, Produced and Directed: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. 1943

A Matter of Life and Death. Written, Produced and Directed: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. 1946

Oh...Rosalinda!!. Written, Produced and Directed: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. 1955

...one of our aircraft is missing. Written, Produced and Directed: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. 1942

The Red Shoes. Written Produced and Directed: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. 1948

The Small Back Room. Written, Produced and Directed: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. 1949

The Spy in Black. Produced: Irving Asher. Directed: Michael Powell. Screenplay: Emeric Pressburger. 1939

The Tales of Hoffmann. Written, Produced and Directed: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. 1951

The Volunteer. Written, Produced and Directed: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. 1943

2. Films by Powell without Pressburger (all Great Britain productions unless stated otherwise)

Age of Consent. Dir. Michael Powell. 1969, Australia

An Airman's Letter to his Mother. Dir. Michael Powell. 1941

Bluebeard's Castle. Dir. Michael Powell. 1964, Germany

The Edge of the World. Dir. Michael Powell. 1937

**The Fire Raisers*. Dir. Michael Powell. 1933

Peeping Tom. Dir. Michael Powell. 1960

The Queen's Guard. Dir. Michael Powell. 1961

Red Ensign. Dir. Michael Powell. 1934

The Thief of Bagdad. Dirs. Ludwig Berger, Michael Powell and Tim Whelan. 1940

3: Films by other directors (all Great Britain productions unless otherwise stated)

Alexander Nevsky. Dir. Sergei M. Eisenstein. 1938, USSR

Battleship Potemkin. Dir. Sergei M. Eisenstein. 1929, USSR

La Belle et la Bête. Dir. Jean Cocteau. 1946, France

Birdcage. Dir. Mike Nichols. 1996, USA

Blackmail. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. 1929

Brief Encounter. Dir. David Lean. 1945

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari. Dir. Robert Wiene. 1919, Germany

The Captive Heart. Dir. Basil Dearden. 1946

Carry on up The Khyber. Dir. Gerald Thomas. 1968

Coal face. Dir. Alberto Cavalcanti. 1935

The Cruel Sea. Dir. Charles Frend. 1952

Dangerous Moonlight. Dir. Brian Desmond Hurst. 1941

Dead of Night. Dirs. Alberto Cavalcanti, Charles Crichton, Basil Dearden and Robert Hamer. 1945

The Demi-Paradise. Dir. Anthony Asquith. 1943

Drifters. Dir. John Grierson. 1929

The Drum. Dir. Zoltan Korda. 1938

Elephant Boy. Dir. Robert Flaherty and Zoltan Korda. 1937

Fires Were Started. Dir. Humphrey Jennings. 1943

First a Girl. Dir. Victor Saville. 1935

The Four Feathers. Dir. Zoltan Korda. 1939

Gaslight. Dir. Thorold Dickinson. 1940

- Genuine*. Dir. Robert Wiene. 1920, Germany
- Georges et Georgette*. Dir. Reinhold Schünzel. 1933, France/Germany
- Great Expectations*. Dir. David Lean. 1946
- Heart of Britain*. Dir. Humphrey Jennings. 1941
- Henry V*. Dir. Laurence Olivier. 1944
- I was Monty's Double*. Dir. John Guillermin. 1958
- Imitation of Life*. Dir. Douglas Sirk. 1959, USA
- Industrial Britain*. Dir. Robert Flaherty. 1931
- The Jungle Book*. Dir. Zoltan Korda. 1942, USA
- Kind Hearts and Coronets*. Dir. Robert Hamer. 1949
- King Solomon's Mines*. Dir. Robert Stevenson. 1937
- The Lady From ShangHai*. Dir. Orson Welles. 1947, USA
- The Lady Vanishes*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. 1938
- Listen to Britain*. Dirs. Humphrey Jennings and Stewert McAllister. 1942
- The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. 1926
- M*. Dir. Fritz Lang. 1931, Germany
- The Magnificent Ambersons*. Dir. Orson Welles. 1942, USA
- The Man Who Knew Too Much*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. 1934
- The Marriage of Corbal*. Dir. Karl Grune. 1936
- Maskerade*. Dir. Willi Forst. 1934, Austria
- Meet Me in St Louis*. Dir. Vincent Minnelli. 1944, USA
- Michel Strogoff*. Dirs. Jacques de Baroncelli and Richard Eichberg. 1935, France/Germany
- Moulin Rouge*. Dir. E.A. Dupont. 1928
- Mrs Miniver*. Dir. William Wyler. 1942, USA
- Night Mail*. Dirs. Harry Watt and Basil Wright. 1936

Nosferatu, Eine Symphonie des Grauens. Dir. F.W. Murnau. 1922, Germany

Queen of Spades. Dir. Thorold Dickinson. 1949

Pandora's Box. Dir. G.W. Pabst. 1928, Germany

The Private Life of Henry VIII, Dir. Alexander Korda. 1933

Raskolnikov. Dir. Robert Wiene. 1923, Germany

The Rat. Dir. Graham Cutts. 1927

The Rat. Dir. Jack Raymond. 1937

The River. Dir. Jean Renoir. 1951, USA

The Robber Symphony. Dir. Friedrich Fehar. 1937

La Ronde. Dir. Max Ophuls. 1950, France

Sabotage. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. 1936

Sanders of the River. Zoltan Korda. 1935

The Searchers. Dir. John Ford. 1956, USA

The Secret Agent. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. 1936

Sixty Glorious Years. Dir. Herbert Wilcox, 1938

The Soldier and the Lady. Dir. George Nicholls Jnr. 1937, USA

Strangers on a Train. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. 1951, USA

The Student of Prague. Dir. Arthur Robison. 1935. Germany

Tawny Pipit. Dirs. Bernard Miles and Charles Saunders. 1944

That Obscure Object of Desire. Dir. Luis Buñuel. 1977, France/Spain

The Third Man. Dir. Carol Reed. 1949

The Thirty Nine Steps. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. 1935

This England. Dir. David Macdonald. 1941

This Happy Breed. Dir. David Lean. 1944

Torgus. Dir. H. Kobe. 1921, Germany

Vertigo. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. 1958, USA

Victoria the Great. Dir. Herbert Wilcox. 1937

Viktor und Viktoria. Dir. Reinhold Schünzel. 1933, Germany

Von Morgens bis Mitternachts. Dir. Karl Heinz Marlin. 1920, Germany

Waxworks. Dir. Paul Leni. 1924, Germany

The Way to the Stars. Dir. Anthony Asquith. 1945

Went the Day Well? Dir. Alberto Cavalcanti. 1942

The Wizard of Oz. Dir. Victor Fleming. 1939, USA

Words for Battle. Dir. Humphrey Jennings. 1941

Young and Innocent. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. 1937



8 Bibliography

This bibliography lists all texts referred to in the thesis. It is arranged as follows:-

1. Microfiles:

A small selection of contemporary reviews, interviews and magazine articles have been cited. The source for these was the British Film Institute's microfile library, the most convenient and comprehensive source of such information. Items cited are listed under the appropriate microfile name.

2. Other texts (unpublished)

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