In a strange Land: the Collaboration of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger

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Emeric Pressburger et Michael Powell sur le plateau de *Tales of Hoffman (1951), london, Film Studios,* Shepperton.
(Photo provenant du catalogue de la rétrospective Powell & Pressburger (Locarno, 1982) / D.R)

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The dominant structural element in the Powell-Pressburger films is the entry of a leading character into a strange land. Consider, for instance, the three successive films that consolidated their status as an independent force in the industry and, much later, were central to their critical rediscovery: *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943), *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), and *I Know Where I'm Going* (1945). These are part of a series of eight successive original screenplays that runs from *Contraband* in 1940 to *A Matter of Life and Death* in 1946; *Colonel Blimp* is the first film to carry the name of their personal production company *The Archers*.

Clive Candy, the future Colonel (indeed, future General) travels to Germany as a young man, and his friend Theo subsequently pays two extensive visits in return, first as a prisoner-of-war, then as a refugee from Nazism. In one of the film's most memorable scenes, given the precise date of 2nd November 1939, Theo goes before a suspicious inspector in order to explain his hostility to the German regime and his wish to remain in England, homeland of his late wife. This tense scene of confrontation has a sunnier parallel in an early scene of *A Canterbury Tale*, where the American Army Sergeant, after arriving late at night in the Kent village of Chillingbourne, wakes up to experience, in the light of day, the unfamiliar surroundings and idiosyncratic routines of his hotel. *I Know Where I'm Going* is centred on the journey of a confident young Englishwoman, Joan Webster, to the Western Isles of Scotland in order to marry her rich middle-aged fiance, an Englishman who rents a property there. In a pivotal scene, she makes a telephone call to his offshore island from the Post Office in Tobermory, where the stilted Englishness of their publicly-conducted conversation makes an expressive contrast with the more relaxed atmosphere of her surroundings. What makes the scene pivotal is the fact

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that Joan is already, in spite of herself, feeling the attraction of the strange land, of its values, and of its people, and she will, inexorably, shift her allegiance from the English incomer - whose face we never see - to the Scot who has stood tactfully at her side for the duration of the phone call. Each film tells a story of personal and cultural encounter, and of mutual *rapprochement*: respectively between English and German, English and American, English and Scottish.

		Travellers	**destinations**
1937	**THE EDGE OF THE WORLD** (Powell only)	English yachtsman	island of 'Hirta'
1939	**THE SPY IN BLACK**	German officer	Orkneys
1940	**CONTRABAND**	Danish captain	Kent/London
1941	**49TH PARALLEL**	German submarine crew	Canada
1942	**ONE OF OUR AIRCRAFT IS MISSING**	British aircrew	Holland [Norfolk]
1943	**THE VOLUNTEER**	volunteer	Fleet Air Arm
1943	**LIFE AND DEATH OF COLONEL BLIMP**	Englishman German	Germany England
1944	**A CANTERBURY TALE**	GI + Londoners	Kent
1945	**I KNOW WHERE I'M GOING**	Englishwoman	Mull
1946	**A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH**	US servicewoman pilot	England 'heaven'
1947	**BLACK NARCISSUS**	British nuns	Himalayas [Pinewood]
1948	**THE RED SHOES**	ballet company	Europe
1949	**THE SMALL BACK ROOM**	London bomb expert	Wales/Dorset
1950	**GONE TO EARTH**	(US star)	Shropshire
1950	**THE ELUSIVE PIMPERNEL**	British agents	France
1951	**TALES OF HOFFMANN**		(ballet)
1955	**OH ROSALINDA!**		(operetta)
1956	**BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE**	Germans/British	South America
1957	**ILL MET BY MOONLIGHT**	Germans/British	Crete
1966	**THEY'RE A WEIRD MOB**	Italian	Australia

As the chart helps to indicate, this pattern is a very consistent one, stretching across thirty years between two films which are, for different reasons, signed by Powell without Pressburger: from *The Edge of the World* (1937), made shortly before the two men met, to *They're a Weird Mob*

(1966), scripted pseudonymously by Pressburger several years after their two-decade partnership came to an end.

The Edge of the World deals with the remote island community of Hirta, otherwise St Kilda (the island whose real-life story is the film's basis), or Foula (the island where it was shot). The stranger here is Powell himself: he opens the film in the cameo role of a visiting English yachtsman, whose curiosity prompts his local guide to tell him the story of the island's recent history, narrated in flashback. On the basis of the *succes d'estime* of this extraordinarily bold independent production, Powell was signed up for London Films by Alexander Korda, who then invited him to collaborate with one of the company's contracted scenarists. Whether or not Korda realised it, the man he selected, Emeric Pressburger, was perfectly equipped to respond to Powell's lively interest in other lands and other cultures - an interest demonstrated by the apprenticeship he had served with Rex Ingram at the Victorine Studios in Nice; by the long solo trip to the East that he made in researching for Korda the abortive project *Burmese Silver*; and by the *Edge of the World* itself. Pressburger himself was a much-travelled cosmopolitan immigrant. Powell in his autobiography *A Life in Movies* - and more than once in television interviews - gave a memorable account of their initial collaboration, and of their recognition of each other as kindred spirits. Their first task was to collaborate on the production of *The Spy in Black*, the story of a German attempt to sabotage the British Fleet anchored off the Orkney Islands in 1917. A novel set entirely in Orkney is transformed into the story of a dashing German submarine commander, played by Conrad Veidt, and his journey from Kiel to carry out his mission: this reworking gives the story a new dynamic, and makes possible a complex play of identifications and tensions.

In the next collaboration, *Contraband*, Veidt becomes a Danish naval captain who penetrates the blacked-out London of early wartime. *The 49th Parallel* deals with a Nazi submarine crew at large in Canada; *One of Our Aircraft is Missing* deals with A British air crew at large in occupied Holland. *The Volunteer*, a 40-minute recruitment film, takes a naive civilian into service with the Fleet Air Arm, and then overseas. The cross-border journeys and encounters of the next trio of films - *Colonel Blimp*, *A Canterbury Tale*, and *I Know Where I'm Going* - have already been referred to. The pattern is sustained, in slightly different ways, in the next trio. *A Matter of Life and Death* portrays the romance between June, an American radio operator stationed in England, and the very English RAF pilot Peter

Carter; *Black Narcissus* takes a group of British nuns from their base in Calcutta into the remote mountain interior; *The Red Shoes* takes a ballet company from London into Europe. But the interior, mental, aspect of the journey structure is more prominent than in the earlier films. *AMOLAD* - to adopt Powell's acronym - is also the back-and-forth journey of Peter Carter between the earthly and heavenly worlds described in the opening titles: "the [world] we know, and another which exists only in the mind of a young airman whose imagination has been violently shaped by war". *The Red Shoes* moves, in a comparable manner, between the world we know and the 'world' of the ballet, which is at times, like the monochrome heaven, given its own independent spatial coordinates. *Black Narcissus* is famous for creating its Himalayan settings entirely within the studio at Pinewood.

The films that follow are full of interest, but there is undeniably a falling off in their success and intensity, and in their makers' standing both with critics and with the industry; and it is mainly the films up to *The Red Shoes* that I will go on referring to. But we can note from the chart the continuation of a pattern of journeys, whether into vivid rural locations (the next two films), or into the 'worlds' of ballet and opera, or into Europe and South America. It's hardly surprising that when, in the mid-1960s, Powell was having trouble getting a script out of a comic novel about an Italian immigrant in Australia, he should have turned back to the man who had written so many comparable stories for and with him: hence *They're A Weird Mob*, scripted by Richard Imrie (Emeric being a version of Pressburger's given name Imre), which operates as an exuberantly over-the-top reprise, in a new-world context, of familiar themes of culture-shock and assimilation.

We can think about this structure in various ways:

1. *Authorship*

There is an evident affinity, which I am not the first to note, between Theo in *Colonel Blimp* and Emeric Pressburger. He too had come to England in the 1930s via Germany, and he too was treated with suspicion by the wartime authorities as a potentially dangerous alien, even while he was writing a series of war-effort films - he couldn't go to the locations of *A Canterbury Tale* because they were in a militarily sensitive area near the South Coast. But of course he had a secure friend and patron in Powell, just as Theo does in Clive, who comes to vouch for him and take him home

with him. Without imposing a simplistically direct correspondence, we can surely see the relation between the europhile Englishman Powell and the anglophile European Pressburger as being inscribed and played out in this narrative - and as being likewise figured at various levels of indirectness in all the other stories of cross-border encounter.

This degree of personal input makes Pressburger into a particularly clear, though of course not unique, example of the screenwriter as (joint) film *auteur*, and renders the shared final credit that appears on all of the films from *One of Our Aircraft* to *Ill Met by Moonlight* fully understandable. The form of words, "Written, Produced and Directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger" is not an indication that they shared all three functions equally, but rather, as Powell's account of its genesis confirms, a way of legitimately foregrounding the creative role of the screenwriter - a role that is consistently and notoriously ignored by a director-centred criticism.

2. *Propaganda*

The two men's first collaboration, *The Spy in Black*, was playing in the West End of London when war was declared, and became one of the first films of the time to play in America to audiences suddenly eager for any kind of war stories from Europe. Their role, and their desire, was from now on to make films that would have a positive wartime function: to celebrate Britain and the Allied cause, and at the same time to warn against complacency and narrowness. What better way is there to foreground, examine and discuss British life and values than by bringing them into confrontation with outsiders, so that we see them through outsiders' eyes (those for instance of Hardt in *The Spy in Black*, Theo in *Colonel Blimp*, Sgt Johnson in *A Canterbury Tale*), or by bringing different native groups or tribes into unaccustomed collision (city and country people in *A Canterbury Tale*, English and Scots in *I Know Where I'm Going*)? One model of the war propaganda narrative is inward-looking and static, drawing a circle around its representations of Britishness: this model is seen at its weakest in films like Korda's *The Lion Has Wings* (late 1939), on which Powell acted as one of a team of directors, and British National's *This England*, directed by David Macdonald in 1941, and also known as *Our Heritage* - those three titles are eloquent enough in themselves - and at its strongest in films like Ealing's *San Demetrio London* (1943), understated epic of stoical patriotic teamwork. Such films seek to instil a sense of quiet pride and resolution; the obvious danger is of embodying and instilling complacency. The Powell/Pressburger model is, in contrast, dynamic and challenging,

sometimes uncomfortably so: witness the various voices of authority who were aggrieved by the eloquence of the criticisms of British weakness put into the mouths of Germans in *49th Parallel* and *Colonel Blimp*, and of Americans in the heavenly trial scene of *A Matter of Life and Death*. Arguably, this very robustness makes them into a more seriously effective form of propaganda, and it has certainly helped to give them a more enduring life than the other sorts of propaganda film.

3. *National cinema*

One of the recurring debates around British cinema has been between the concepts of national and international. Even British audiences seemed, from an early stage in the medium's development, to show a preference for films from elsewhere, especially America. One way of trying to compete in the marketplace, both at home and abroad, was by downplaying the British origin of the native product in favour of an 'international' look, helped often by an overseas star or two. In the 1930s, after trying this a few times with limited success, the leading British producer Michael Balcon changed his policy, arguing that 'we shall become international by being national' - not by trying, or pretending, to *be* international. This paradoxical formulation seemed to be borne out by the success, at home and abroad, of a certain range of very indigenous films, among them a number produced by Balcon himself at Ealing from 1938. At the same time, British studios continued to turn out a lot of what can be termed 'sub-Ealing' films, whose cosy insularity and lack of energy meant that they had little appeal in the domestic market, let alone the overseas one. Being 'national' was not enough. As I have argued in an essay on the pre-1930 period for *The British Cinema Book* (edited by Robert Murphy, BFI 1997), it seems plausible to give a further paradoxical twist to this national/international opposition: British cinema only, in the first place, *becomes national by being international*. 'It was only when Britain became intelligently open to international influences that it began to be able to find a strong, meaningful national identity for its own production'. This process is well illustrated in the early careers of Alfred Hitchcock and of Michael Powell, both of whom did important apprentice work in European studios, and who in fact worked briefly together on Hitchcock's *Champagne* (1928) and *Blackmail* (1929). And it is supremely illustrated in the subsequent collaboration of Powell and Pressburger, who began working together just at the time Hitchcock was preparing to leave Britain for Hollywood and David O.Selznick. (There is a separate article to be written on the fascinating pattern of convergence and divergence between the careers of

Hitchcock and Powell). The international element in both the production team and the narratives they produced does not have the effect of making these films any less authentically 'national', quite the reverse. Of course these concepts need discussing further, and relating closely to the film texts; here I am simply indicating some ways of thinking about the implications of the dominant structure of this set of narratives.

4. a. *Film Narrative*

Anyone who now studies film is familiar with the argument of Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", first published in *Screen* in 1975 and widely anthologised thereafter. The article broke new ground by analysing the three-fold male *look* which, according to Mulvey, has dominated the narrative of mainstream cinema. The male protagonist looks, and we the audience look with him - we see through his eyes, often literally through a point-of-view construction. And his look, and our look, are also the look of the director, through the camera, without which the film would not have come into being. It is a genuine 'trinity' of looks: three in one and one in three. Only one of them is openly acknowledged, that of the protagonist. The characters show no awareness of being watched by the camera, and thus by the audience. Hence Mulvey can talk about the voyeurism or scopophilia of this dominant cinema, which can freely and with impunity enjoy the pleasure of looking, at women especially. The offence caused at the time by Powell's 1960 film *Peeping Tom* stems from the radical strategy that has since made it so celebrated: the way it so intensely exploits and deconstructs the mechanics of the aggressively voyeuristic look of its leading character and his camera. The point I want to make here is that films like *The Edge of the World* and *I Know Where I'm Going* involve an analogous voyeuristic look: the tourist's look at exotic scenery and culture, in this case the southerner's look at the Celtic fringe. And there is a comparable three-fold look, or encounter, in operation. The director goes to Scotland - or to Canada, or Kent, or Australia, or wherever - and the spectator is transported there in viewing the film, the visiting protagonist constituting, as it were, a surrogate for both.

This kind of strategy is arguably just as central to the film medium as the 'Mulvey' one; after all, settings are an essential a component as characters to the mechanism of most narratives, while scenic and other locations have constituted, right from the early days, a strong *attraction* for audiences parallel to that of the human face and the human body. Classical documentary takes us systematically into unfamiliar places, and it's

interesting that British documentary-based critics like Paul Rotha so persistently tried to claim Powell for documentary, on the strength of films like the two Scottish ones. But Powell always repudiated any documentary affiliations, insisting on the value of the strong personal story elements which in turn made the documentarists uncomfortable. The structure of the triple look/visit that is so characteristic of the series of Powell-Pressburger films goes beyond the double one associated with documentary. Perhaps the clearest analogy is with the classical Western, where so frequently protagonist, film-maker and audience make a journey together into the open landscape of the West, and all three obtain different forms of mastery over it.

5. b. *Film narrative*

A Matter of Life and Death opens with a tracking shot across the cosmos, before closing in on the Earth and England and then a specific location, and, towards the end, narrows down to the subjective view from inside Peter Carter's closing eyelid as he prepares for an operation: much of the film takes place explicitly inside his mind. This is typical of a film which is at once a wide-ranging historical and cultural debate between Britain and America (prompted by a commission from the Ministry of Information) and an intimate psychological story. The ultimate richness and fascination of this whole body of films is, for me, the way they keep moving so boldly between two kinds of world: location and studio, external and internal, objective and subjective. In this, they can be seen once again - as with the travel mechanism, and as with Powell's foregrounding of the mechanism of the look in *Peeping Tom* - to be exploiting and foregrounding a characteristic, in this case a doubleness, that is central to the medium.

A quintessential Powell/Pressburger title is *The Small Back Room.* Repeatedly, they relate their protagonists to a private space, often a secret or taboo room, which constitutes a retreat, and a source of energy, power, vision, magic. Within the wide vistas of Kent to which they travel as modern pilgrims in *A Canterbury Tale*, Alison and Peter both discover such private spaces, respectively in the dusty old laid-up caravan which she once shared with her lost fiance, and in the organ loft where Peter is providentially given the chance to play. In films like this one and *I Know Where I'm Going*, this structure clearly owes much to Pressburger, but it is equally strong, to say the least, in two of the films Powell made apart from him, *Peeping Tom* and *Bluebeard's Castle* (shot in Germany, 1964): in both of these, the penetration into a taboo space (the 'small back room' of Mark

Lewis's film workshop, the final room where Bluebeard reaches Judith) provides - as it does with happier results in *I Know Where I'm Going* - the resolution of the film. While the psychological connotations of these small back rooms are rich and various (sex, self, soul, subconscious), it is worth remarking that the original meaning of the word camera is, precisely, room. A camera is a room with a view, a room with a hole for light to enter (i.e. *camera obscura*) shrunk down into a box. Many of these characters look out from their 'rooms', as voyeurs and/or artists, with a sense of power over what they see. In *AMOLAD* the living room of the Roger Livesey character, Dr Reeves, actually houses, constitutes, a *camera obscura*, from which he looks out and observes the village "as in a poet's eye", and in *Peeping Tom* the relation room-camera-head is explicit; but such a relation is basic to the whole of Powell and Pressburger's cinema. The landscape into which their characters travel can be an external or an internal one, or indeed both at once.

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