

'Under control'?: *Black Narcissus* and the Imagining of India

• Kelly Davidson and John Hill

Introduction

The change in the critical fortunes of the films of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger is well-known. Due to the strong emphasis upon documentary and realism within British film culture, their films, particularly those made in the 1940s and 1950s, were seen to deviate from critically favoured modes of British filmmaking. As a result, they often fell victim to either critical misunderstanding or hostility. Thus, for all its 'technical originality', the critic Richard Winnington felt that *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946) had moved away from the 'the essential realism' that was 'the true business of the British movie'.¹ Similarly, the distinguished British producer Michael Balcon, with whom Powell worked during the 1930s, objected to *Black Narcissus* (1947) on the grounds it departed from the 'national style' that the documentary movement had established.² From the 1970s onwards, however, the critical pendulum swung decisively. In this period, new generations of critics began to query the privileged position enjoyed by realism within British critical discourse and sought to champion works – such as Hammer horror, Gainsborough melodrama and the films of Michael Powell – that could be seen to defy the norms of a realist aesthetic. Indeed, it could be argued that this 'palace revolution' has now proved so successful that not only has the critical dismissal of works of 'fantasy' been successfully challenged but a critical preference for fantasy over works of realism has become the dominant strain within British film writing.

However, while the challenge to the dominance of realism within British film culture has been an important and necessary development, it has not been without its

problematic aspects. In some cases, there has been a tendency simply to invert the old critical orthodoxy and to celebrate works of fantasy and stylistic excess simply because they are *not* conventional works of social realism, rather than on the basis of their own artistic merits and cultural attributes. Similarly, if earlier critical discourse, borne of a preference for documentary and realism, tended to identify stylisation as content-less and 'empty', then the reclamation of the 'non-realist' strands of British cinema has often appeared to follow suit, placing value upon formal play and the foregrounding of film technique as ends in themselves, irrespective of their consequences for 'content' or ideological outlook. In the case of the films of Powell and Pressburger, these developments have not been without their peculiarities. The critical rehabilitation of Powell and Pressburger occurred at a time when film theory was not only suspicious of realism on aesthetic grounds but political grounds as well. The turn against realism, in this regard, was characteristically associated with a search for a more politically radical cinema capable of addressing social complexity and contradiction. The films of Powell and Pressburger, however, clearly sit uneasily within this category.

Described as 'High Tory' by one of their early champions Raymond Durnat, the world-view of Powell and Pressburger's films has generally been at odds with the left-wing outlook of so many of their cinephile admirers.³ This is not to suggest that Powell and Pressburger's work is reducible to simple ideological meanings. As Durnat also argues, Powell and Pressburger's films may be seen to defy simple interpretation in the way that they engage in an elaborate 'game of hide-and-seek' between 'the patriotic and the exotic, the

- *Black Narcissus* and the Imagining of India

traditional and the technological, the Tory and the pagan'.⁴ Nevertheless, it is to make the point that, for all its formal exuberance and self-consciousness, the cinema of Powell and Pressburger does tend to draw upon and elaborate relatively conservative discourses of identity and place that is evident, for example, in the portrait of Englishness in *A Canterbury Tale* (1944) or the imagining of Scotland in *I Know Where I'm Going* (1945). It is also an issue that arises in relation to any consideration of *Black Narcissus*. For while the film is set in India and was released in 1947, the year India was finally granted independence, there has been relatively little discussion amongst writers on Powell and Pressburger of the film's representation of India or assessment of the significance of this. On the other hand, writers with an interest in orientalism and the cinematic portrait of India have tended to downplay the importance of the film's authorship and have simply identified the film in terms of ongoing patterns of orientalist imagery. Thus, in Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's

discussion of 'tropes of empire', the film is simply one of a relatively undifferentiated number of 'Western films about the colonies' that also includes *Wee Willie Winkie* (1937) and *The King and I* (1956).⁵ Evidently critical approaches concerned with the unravelling of ideological patterns will alight upon different elements from those perspectives governed by auteurist principles. However, the apparent disparity in the assessments of the film provided by the different critical traditions is worthy of reflection. To what extent does *Black Narcissus* depend upon the mobilisation of orientalist ideas and images and to what extent does it depart from them? How, in turn, does this relate to the film's authorship and the aesthetic strategies which are employed and are these distinguishable from other films concerned with the East-West encounter?

***Black Narcissus* as Critique**

Given the timing of the film's production and release, it is perhaps not surprising that *Black Narcissus* should reveal an anxiety about the British presence in India. Indeed, in some respects, the film may be read as providing a critique of British rule in India and an exposure of some of its inadequacies. Based on Rumer Godden's 1939 novel, the film tells the story of a group of British nuns whose vocation sends them to educate and administer medicine to a community of Himalayan hill-tribes. The eventual failure of the mission, and departure of the nuns, however, highlights the ill-conceived nature of their enterprise. British rule in India did not, of course, rest upon military might or economic power alone but the encouragement of cultural attitudes and outlooks congenial to the maintenance of colonial rule. As J. Farish, a member of the Bombay government, observed in 1938, 'the Natives must either be kept down by a sense of our power, or they must willingly submit from a conviction that we are more wise, more just, more humane, and more anxious to improve their condition than any other rulers they could have'.⁶ In paternalistic British India, education was regarded as particularly important in sustaining a sense of British cultural and



- Hollywood orientalism?: *Wee Willie Winkie* (1937).



• *Black Narcissus*: Calling the imperialist civilising mission into question.

intellectual superiority and in ensuring that Indian subjects would work for, and not against, their imperial masters. While the value of

missionary work was more politically contentious, it too was seen to have a role to play in rescuing natives from 'backwardness' and

'immortality'. Women missionaries occupied a special place in this arena since the early nineteenth century, taking an active role in spreading education for Indian women and, by extension, emphasising the benefits of a superior, English-language schooling for native families. Furthermore, since the Victorian era, this civilising mission was embraced and cultivated by English women because of the emancipatory position it offered them. More than angels of hearth and home they could preside as "eve-angels" of the vast English empire itself.⁷

In *Black Narcissus*, however, the imperial civilising mission supposedly represented by these 'eve-angels' is repeatedly called into question. Macaulay's notorious 'Minute on Education' (1835) indicated that in order to establish the Raj in India, the British required indigenous interlocutors to act as cultural mediators between the colonisers and colonised: 'We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect'.⁸ It is one such intermediary – the Old General Toda Rai (Esmond Knight) – who paves the sisters' way to setting up the House of St Faith not only by making the palace available to them but by bribing the local people to visit the school and dispensary. Without this method of persuasion, it is implied, the sisters' presence at Mopu would hold little attraction for the villagers. Indeed, the fragility of the nuns' hold over the locals is later demonstrated when the villagers stay away following the death of a young child whom Sister Honey (Jenny Laird) has misguidedly provided with medicine. The sisters also depend upon local interpreters and, once the mission is opened, they are forced to rely upon Joseph Anthony (Eddie Whaley Jr), a local child provided by the Old General, for assistance in the classroom. Given Sister Clodagh's (Deborah Kerr) conviction that Indians are 'like children' in need of care and discipline, the nuns' own dependence upon an Indian child provides an ironic commentary on their own inability not only to 'look after themselves' (as the Old

General puts it) but also those around them. Indeed, left to their own devices, the sisters prove entirely ill-suited to the completion of their mission. Sister Philippa (Flora Robson) turns the vegetable plot from a labour of self-sufficiency into a flower garden. Sister Briony (Judith Furse) fails to heal the sick villagers and her dispensary becomes little more than a circus tent where the villagers come to enjoy the chemical reactions of her medicinal 'magic'. Imperial education, believed to be so important in the inculcation and maintenance of British ideas and attitudes, is also revealed to be shallow and irrelevant. In one scene, the children mimic the language of British militarism, repeating the words 'cannon . . . warship . . . bayonet. . . dagger . . . gun' that are spelt out on a blackboard, while the teacher herself Sister Ruth (Kathleen Byron) is shown to have lost interest in the class and to be looking out of the window at the British agent Mr Dean (David Farrar). In conversation with Mr Dean, Sister Clodagh had stressed the importance of 'discipline' in their dealings with the natives; by the film's end it is clear that any ambition to impose discipline upon the local population has entirely failed. While the original novel does suggest how Sister Clodagh's failure then leads to a kind of redemption in the form of a newly acquired humility, the film gives this theme much less weight, highlighting instead the sense of loss and unspoken desire involved in the last meeting between Sister Clodagh and Dean.

***Black Narcissus* and Orientalism**

However, while the film may dramatise the irrelevance and ultimate futility of the sisters' mission, its critique of colonial rule only extends so far. For despite the text's sceptical attitude towards the activities of the nuns, it is still the colonisers' predicaments and emotional responses that are deemed to be the most significant and which dominate the narrative. Thus, while British colonial power may be seen to be diminishing, it is nevertheless British consciousness of events that remains privileged. Although the film includes Indian characters of dramatic importance, they are rarely involved in

scenes that don't include Westerners and, in contrast to the spiritual and emotional crises experienced by the sisters, they are invested with little psychological depth. The Old General is enlightened but misguided. His nephew, the Young General (Sabu), is charming but vain and prey to temptation. The old palace caretaker Angu Ayah (May Hallatt) lives largely in the past, sceptical of the changes around her and waiting for the sisters to fail, while Kanchi (Jean Simmons), the troublesome orphan, remains mute throughout the film's entire duration. This is also so of the Old General's uncle, the Holy Man, as well as the members of Mopu's village community who provide a silent – if decorative – background against which the colonisers work through their internal dramas. Furthermore, all of the Indian speaking parts, apart from that of the Young General, are played by white European actors. Inevitably, this reinforces the European ethnocentrism of the film's plot, permitting white actors, in Robyn Wiegman's words, to 'occupy and signify the full range of humanity' in a way that non-white actors are not.⁹

The foregrounding of female characters also constitutes a significant aspect of the film's dramatisation of failing colonial confidence. As various writers have noted in relation to Anglo-Indian literature, the changing character of Britain's relationship to India has typically been figured in terms of shifts in gender relations. The 'classic' imperial narrative in this regard characteristically involves a male hero capable of imposing order upon the East and successfully engaged in military conquest or a civilising mission. However, as opposition to British colonial rule grows and Indian independence is achieved, the role of women becomes more central to the imperial narrative. Two aspects of this are worth noting. As women become more central to the imperial narrative, so there is a shift in emphasis away from the ability of the Westerner to organise and rule, or impose order upon India, towards the *experience* of it. Second, the increasing focus upon the – woman's – experience of India (rather than the imposition of order upon it) is linked to an

intensified sense – as in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) – that this experience also outstrips the Westerner's ability to define or understand it. As a result, the mode of representing India also alters. On the one hand, the inability to make sense of the experience of India encourages the use of irony whereby the heroic presumptions of the classic imperial narrative are deflated and viewed in a more detached, or pragmatic, light. On the other hand, this inability to comprehend India – and the loss of authority that this entails – may take a hysterical turn (as in the novels of Ruth Praver Jhabvala).¹⁰ It is these twin modes of irony and hysteria that are also evident in *Black Narcissus*.

From virtually the beginning of the sisters' arrival in Mopu, they are subject to events and experiences that defy their capacity to understand them. Rashes break out on their bodies for which they can find no apparent cause. The palace's mountain location, the clear air and ever-present wind provoke reactions – such as Sister Philippa's planting of colourful flowers rather than vegetables or Sister Clodagh's memories of Ireland – that defy rational explanation and which neither hard work nor spiritual devotions can suppress. 'It's this place with its strange atmosphere', observes Sister Clodagh. However, it is an atmosphere that she remains powerless either to understand or overcome. As the seasons change from summer to winter to spring, so the plight of the nuns intensifies, plunging them into crises of self-doubt and despair.

At its most extreme – as in the case of Sister Ruth – this crisis manifests itself in the form of hysteria, mental breakdown and, ultimately, death.

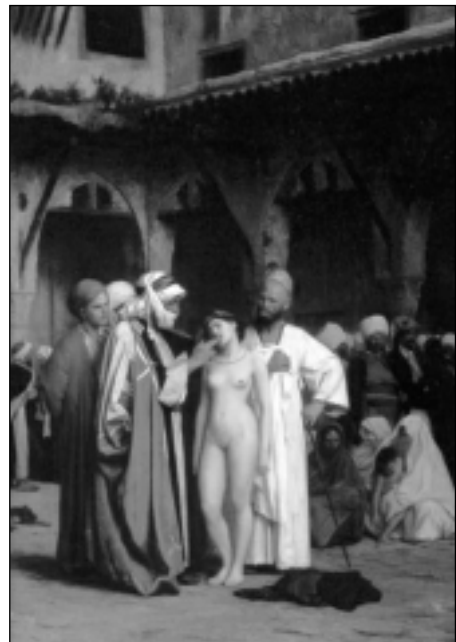
It is, of course, the case that many of Powell and Pressburger's films display an interest in travel and displacement, the exile's encounter with alterior landscapes and the liminal nature of border zones. Indeed, for Charles Barr, 'the entry of a leading character into a strange land' may be identified as the 'dominant structural element' in the Powell-Pressburger films.¹¹ However, while the transplantation of characters to novel environments in which they uncover

aspects of their inner selves may be a recurring feature of Powell and Pressburger's work, it cannot but help take on an added significance when located within a colonial context. As Edward Said observes, orientalism has provided the West with 'one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other'.¹² Accordingly, the employment of India as an 'alterior' environment does not provide a neutral dramatic space in which characters may conduct their inner psychic struggles but is already ideologically charged with meaning. Thus, while an emphasis upon Indian 'unknowability' may suggest scepticism towards the presumptions of Western rationalism, it simultaneously invokes a strong sense of the incontrovertably alien character and otherness of the East. In the case of *Black Narcissus*, this is linked to both physical and metaphysical difference.

'Exotic and Erotic'

Having read Rumer Godden's book, Powell records that he felt 'the story, so coolly told in excellent prose, would be wildly exotic and erotic on the screen'.¹³ The enthusiasm for using India as a site of exotic sexual energies is hardly surprising. As Glenn Jordan and Chris Weedon observe, the image of the East as 'a site of eroticism, decadence and sexual gratification' stretches as far back as the Middle Ages and has formed a key element of the exoticism with which the East has been associated.¹⁴ Likewise, in *Black Narcissus*, the 'strange atmosphere' that exerts such a hold upon the sisters is not simply the result of an irrepressible nature (air and wind) but the sensuality associated with the location and its people. The Convent is located on the site of the Palace built by the Old General's uncle as a home for his wives and mistresses. Previously known as 'the House of Women', the building remains host to erotic murals and paintings that continue to disturb the building's new occupants. Mr Dean, for example, stands provocatively beside a picture of the courtesans at the Old Palace, while taking mischievous delight in informing Sister Clodagh of the palace's former title. Shortly afterwards,

the camera travels across an erotic mural before revealing Sister Clodagh, awake and unsettled in bed. Shots of erotic murals are also seen prior to Sister Clodagh falling asleep (and dropping her bible) while watching over Sister Ruth (who then runs off in pursuit of Mr Dean). The aura of disconcerting sensuality attached to the place is reinforced by the Indians who enter the building. According to Powell, it is Kanchi who brings 'the world, the flesh, and the devil into the nuns' retreat'.¹⁵ Described in Rumer Godden's original novel as 'like a basket of fruit, piled high and luscious and ready to eat', she is first seen in the palace courtyard, sitting on her battered suitcase and sensually eating a ripe melon.¹⁶ Subsequently brought upstairs and 'inspected' by Sister Clodagh (in a scene loosely reminiscent of a nineteenth-century French Orientalist painting such as Jean-Leon Gérôme's *The Slave Market* from the 1860s), she is identified as a fallen but nevertheless alluring figure, rich in sexual promise.¹⁷ Deprived of speech throughout the course of the film, her sensuality is repeatedly expressed through her physical actions. The



• Gérôme, *The Slave Market*

Young General, Dilip Rai, first spies her when she falls at his feet following her narcissistic dance across the Blue Room in which she seems to bring the spirit of the old palace back to life. Subsequently she is seen to sniff the air greedily for the scent of the Young General's 'Black Narcissus' and lasciviously falls to her hands and knees to observe, from behind a partition, the Young General conjugating French verbs while struggling to maintain concentration.

So, while Sister Clodagh complains to Dean of how 'the world' came 'thrusting in behind' the Young General, it is in fact Kanchi (with some aid from Angu Ayah) who is responsible for his seduction and the subsequent abandonment of his studies. Following in the footsteps of the Old General, the Young General initially displays a keen interest in the education that would initiate him into the values and conventions of British imperialism. As he remarks to Sister Clodagh, 'Don't think to count me as a man. I am only interested in studious things'. However, just as the nuns remain unable to stop the wind blowing, so the Young General fails to resist the advances of the convent's most provocative inhabitant. Confronted with Kanchi's fierce sensuality, the Young General's desire for education dissipates and he abandons his studies to elope with Kanchi (at around the same time as the villagers also abandon the dispensary). Although he returns to the convent to make his peace with Sister Clodagh, his desire for an English education has now gone and he has resolved to become more like his ancestors ('warriors and princes'). This involves abandoning the path of his uncle in favour of that of his grandfather, the architect of the old palace, whose example, it is implied, he is also following in taking Kanchi as a concubine.

Within this context, it is not surprising how so much of the anxiety and disturbance associated with the nuns' response to their new environment is then linked to erotic longing. Sister Clodagh is unable to suppress the resurgence of her memories of her thwarted love affair with Con back home in Ireland (and it is significant that the Young General appears at the palace immediately following the nun's first

flashback). Mr Dean becomes a figure of erotic fascination for Sister Ruth whose subsequent rejection by him propels her towards breakdown and madness. As Michael Walker suggests, the film provides a vivid dramatisation of the 'return of the repressed' in the way that it charts the working through of the consequences of the nuns' own suppressed desires and longings.¹⁸ However, while Walker rightly pays attention to the 'seeds of destruction' which the sisters carry inside them, he also downplays the role and significance of the film's construction of India as an 'other' space, exercising a sexual power over the bodies and psyches of those who come within its orbit.¹⁹ Thus, while the film may share features of the woman-centred melodrama in the way that the main characters succumb to their environment and see their goals frustrated, the overlaying of these conventions upon a colonial drama inevitably results in additional ideological baggage.

Thus, for Laura Kipnis, the outbreak of hysteria and 'pathological female desire' in post-colonial narratives may be seen to serve the ideological function of disavowing male responsibility for colonialism.²⁰ Although Kipnis is referring to films of a later vintage (such as the film version of *A Passage to India* (1984)), the argument is clearly relevant to *Black Narcissus* in which the loss of female control and the descent, in Sister Ruth's case, into hysteria is contrasted with the continuing calm and authority of the Old General's agent Mr Dean. Dean is not, of course, the classic imperial hero but, in line with the romanticism of Powell and Pressburger, is something of a Byronic outsider. Just as Mopu itself is neither entirely within, or outside, of British control, so Dean himself occupies a position in-between the imperial centre and the native culture. The agent of the Mopu estate, he is described by Sister Philippa as having given himself up to India, living in close proximity to the native population and appearing to possess the 'insider knowledge' that the sisters obviously lack. Thus, he rightly observes that the palace is no place for a nunnery and correctly predicts that the mission will fail to survive past the rains. He also provides ongoing advice and assistance to

the sisters as they are faced with various obstacles. Nevertheless, Dean does not display the certainties of the old imperial hero, downplaying his role as an authoritative interpreter of local culture and adopting irony as a mode of representation. In his initial letter, read by Sister Clodagh at the film's beginning, he deflates the pretensions of missionary rhetoric and distances himself from colonial discourse, asserting that the natives are like people everywhere. 'The men are men, no better or worse than anywhere else' he observes. 'The women are women, the children are children'. He subsequently tells Sister Clodagh that the people will not follow orders and pokes fun at the sisters' high-minded ideals. Like Fielding in *A Passage to India*, he is a man 'ironically aware of himself and ironically aware of others'.²¹ However, as Mary-Louise Pratt suggests, the use of ironising statements and rhetoric within imperial narratives less subverts imperial discourse than offers a liberal variation of it, permitting a continuing European mastery over alterior surroundings while implying freedom from the guilt of association with imperial domination.²² In this regard, the association of Dean with irony provides him with a protective shield, downplaying his colonial role as the General's agent and his privileged position in relation to the natives (including, it is implied, privileged access to the local women such as the seventeen-year-old Kanchi).

Anne Beezer also suggests that while irony may take on the guise of 'an analytical, "deconstructive" mode' in the way in which it deflates the pretensions and high-mindedness of heroic imperial discourses, it is also typically 'conservative in its operations', implying that 'if a long enough view is taken, all current events and individual dramas are insignificant in the face of the "immensity of life"'.²³ It is also this sense of the transience of human actions in the face of the 'immensity of life' that underpins the film's deployment of irony and hysteria in response to the ultimate 'unknowability' of India. For Said, a key feature of orientalism is not simply its construction of the East as 'absolutely different' but as 'unchanging'.²⁴ In *Black Narcissus* this



• *A Passage to India* (Lean, 1984)

sense of timelessness is partly the product of the film's portrait of an unyielding nature. Like the Marabar caves in *A Passage to India*, the Himalayan mountains not only cast an inexplicable spell upon the visitors but reduce their actions to meaninglessness. Sister Philippa, for example, complains how she can 'see too far' and that her endeavours no longer seem to matter. While the disturbing effect of the landscape is partly connected to its sensuous powers (the highest peak, for example, is known as the 'Bare Goddess'), it is also linked to an unsettling spirituality. In her discussion of Forster's *A Passage to India*, Teresa Hubel suggests how Hinduism figures as 'a danger to the Western mind' for which it 'comes to be associated with emptiness'.²⁵ In *Black Narcissus*, the disorientation of the sisters is likewise linked to the presence of the ascetic Holy Man, the Old General's uncle who has renounced worldly pursuits and sits silently on the mountain-side above the palace, apparently oblivious to events around him. Following the disappearance of Sister Ruth, Sister Clodagh urges Joseph Anthony to ask the Holy Man if he has seen her. The young boy refuses to do so, remonstrating that the problem of Sister Ruth (so urgent for Sister Clodagh) 'would be a very little thing to him – he wouldn't notice it'. In this way, the film pits the Christian proselytising of the missionaries against a Hindu spirituality that operates according to a different temporality and appears to suffuse the very atmosphere of the place. It is, of course, the case that in Powell and Pressburger's work, place rarely functions as mere geography but assumes, in the words of Andrew Moor, a symbolic status 'beyond the merely cultural-material-historical'.²⁶

However, given the ideological load already carried by the imagery of India, it is virtually inescapable that, in this context, the investment of place with metaphysical qualities reinforces a sense of oriental otherness (in a way, for example, that the association of the Kent landscape with mystical properties in *A Canterbury Tale* does not).

From this perspective, *Black Narcissus* does, indeed, appear to be located within an orientalist discourse, constructing India for the Western cinematic audience as the repository of a range of images of the exotic and other. For Said, this 'otherness' may be figured in different and apparently inconsistent ways (such that the Orient may be seen to be both a repository of sensuality and spirituality) but what remains consistent is the 'flexible positional superiority' that it provides the Westerner who may enter 'a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient' without losing 'the relative upper hand'.²⁷ Thus, while the film may narrativise a sense of fading colonial authority and prospective loss, the 'flexible positional superiority' of the Western spectator is nevertheless maintained through the construction of India through conventional orientalist images and tropes that privilege the Western imagining of the East.

'Fairytale' India and Aesthetic Self-consciousness

There does remain, however, the question of the extent to which the film's use of orientalist imagery is complicated by its aesthetic approach. As is well-known, the film's location Mopu is not an actual place and the whole of the film was shot in England in the studios at Pinewood and the nearby sub-tropical gardens at Leonardslee House. Powell himself explains how, in contrast to his use of the Côte d'Azur in his later film *The Red Shoes* (1948) – 'a fairytale landscape' shot 'in a fairytale way' – he sought to 'create and control the atmosphere from start to finish' and, thus, avoid the problems of matching studio shots with Indian exteriors.²⁸ The Himalayas themselves were constructions, painted by Powell's collaborator Percy 'Poppa' Day onto

glass, and then later superimposed in the studio over the pre-lit and photographed long shots of the Palace exteriors.²⁹ As Powell indicates, his ambition was to construct a 'fairytale' India from which actual Indian locations were excluded and in which the environment would give outward expression to inner emotion. Thus, as in family melodrama, the characters' repressed emotions and impulses are displaced onto an elaborate mise-en-scène characterised by an exaggerated use of colour, lighting and composition. This reaches its climax in the section near the film's end involving Sister Clodagh and Sister Ruth which is virtually word-less and provides an example of what Powell himself has referred to as an experiment in the 'composed film', synthesising music and carefully choreographed imagery.³⁰ To this extent, the film's artificial settings – and imagery of India – exhibit a degree of formal self-consciousness, foregrounding their own status as fictional constructions and as forms of psychological projection.

A further element of aesthetic self-consciousness (missing from the original novel) is also apparent in the film's opening narration in which Mother Dorothea (Nancy Roberts) tells Sister Clodagh of her new responsibility and hands her the letter written by Mr Dean. Although the camera assumes the position of Sister Clodagh's point-of-view, it is Mr Dean's voice that is heard on the soundtrack. The sequence then dissolves from a shot of the letter to shots of the palace at Mopu and the surrounding mountains. In this way, the images of Mopu are ambivalently attached to both Dean and Clodagh (whose reveries become a feature of the film as a whole). Identifying the film as 'modernist', Priya Jaikumar suggests how this sequence establishes a problematic sense of place that highlights the subjectivity – and the absence of a 'singular perspective' – involved in the way in which Mopu is perceived.³¹ This emphasis upon the mediating role of representation is further reinforced by the use of pictures and paintings within the film, as when the film cuts from Dean and Angu Ayah gazing at a picture of the courtesans on the palace wall to Mother Dorothea and Sister Clodagh sifting

through the photographs of Mopu in the convent in Calcutta.

Such devices do, of course, give formal embodiment to the problem of the representability of India as previously discussed, hinting at the unclear boundaries between 'objective' reality and 'subjective' perception in the film's depiction of the imaginary Mopu. However, while this is an important aspect of the film, it would be a mistake to over-state the extent to which the film foregrounds the subjective and relational status of its representation of reality. Thus, while the images that accompany Dean's voice-over at the film's beginning may initially exhibit a degree of narrative indeterminacy, they quickly assume the apparently 'objective' status of *histoire*. The shots of the villagers also carry few markers of subjective narration and, indeed, come as close to the documentary look as the film ever does (just as Farrar's voice-over at this point assumes the recognisable tones of the informational travelogue). More generally, the film's questioning of its own representational status – or 'modernism' – only goes so far. For all of the film's fairytale quality, Powell took pride in the success he achieved in recreating India in the studio. Once the film was finished, he remembers, 'it was so convincing that people who knew the Himalayas have told me where the picture was shot'.³² In this respect, the film does not seek to alert the spectator to the artificiality (or dream-like quality) of the setting on a systematic basis, but works to invest its drama with sufficient degree of 'verisimilitude' and diegetic plausibility for the spectator to maintain a 'suspension of disbelief'.

Moreover, although the theme of India's apparent 'unknowability' may suggest the impossibility of an 'objective' representation of India, it is the characters within the film who are beset by crisis rather than the film's own representational system. As previously noted, it was important for Powell to be in charge of all the elements of the film: 'Wind, the altitude, the beauty of the setting – it must all be under our control', he recalls.³³ Thus, while the film's plot may identify the alien character or 'otherness' of

India and suggest the impossibility for the Westerner of truly understanding or representing it, the film itself demonstrates an unusually confident visual mastery of the India it depicts. Charles Barr's identification of the connection between the visit or journey structure characteristic of Powell and Pressburger's films and a system of triple looks is helpful here. Drawing an analogy with the Western, he suggests how the protagonist, film-maker and audience 'make a journey together into the open landscape' and how 'all three obtain different forms of mastery over it'.³⁴ In the case of *Black Narcissus*, however, it can be seen how Barr's model is modified and how the protagonists fail to achieve the mastery of landscape that it implies. (Indeed, despite the looks of the main characters off-screen, the film largely avoids point-of-view shots of the landscape until we are invited to share Sister Clodagh's view of the disappearance of the old palace behind a haze of fog at the film's end). However, the loss of 'mastery' experienced by the protagonists does not extend to the look of the camera which continues to maintain its authority over what is shown. Nor does it extend to the look of the spectator for whom the film sustains a coherent – and aesthetically beguiling – spectacle that stands at odds with the disturbed responses to the environment undergone by the characters themselves.³⁵

Conclusion

For Michael Walker, *Black Narcissus* is that 'rare creature' – 'a great British movie'.³⁶ In many ways, it is hard to quarrel with Walker's conclusion. *Black Narcissus* still stands as an audacious achievement, rich in visual flair and invention.

Initially criticised in some quarters for its excessive stylisation and lack of realism, it is these very same elements that now lay claim to our admiration and interest. However, *Black Narcissus* is also a product of its time and place, breaking out of imaginative confines in some ways but imaginatively constrained in others. Thus, while the film begins to probe questions of

imperial fantasy and its relationship to Western anxieties, it only goes so far, caught up in the very fantasies that it might otherwise be regarded as opening up to question.

In this respect, the film also gives rise to some issues concerning critical method. To return to the questions raised at the start of the discussion, it is clear that *Black Narcissus* is a film of some aesthetic complexity that does not straightforwardly conform to a pattern of orientalist filmmaking. On the other hand, it seems equally clear that the film does not depart from this tradition to the extent that some critics have suggested (or would like). Two points seem pertinent. First, the auteurist concern with the recurrence of features across a body of films has rightly identified the meta-cinematic and self-reflexive elements that have been a feature of Powell's work. However, the consciousness of these elements, strengthened by a familiarity with the deconstructive manoeuvres of a later film such as *Peeping Tom* (1960), has, perhaps, led critics to overstate the significance of these elements in films in which they perform a much less systematic function. This, in turn, may be linked to the rise of a form of 'redemptive' reading in which the more conservative, or ideologically problematic, aspects of Powell and Pressburger's work are acknowledged but held to be subverted by the self-conscious or formally excessive elements at work in their films.³⁷ However, the critical defence of Powell and Pressburger does not seem to require (or merit) either the vindication of every aspect of their work or an alignment with contemporary sensibilities. In this regard, *Black Narcissus*, in common with many other Powell and Pressburger films, is a work whose aesthetic virtuosity embodies, more than it subverts, a socially conservative vision.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in Scott Salwolke, *The Films of Michael Powell and the Archers* (Scarecrow Press, 1997), p. 133.
- 2 Quoted in Kevin Macdonald, *Emeric Pressburger: The Life and Death of a Screenwriter* (Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 272. Powell himself explained that his 'business was not realism, but surrealism': 'This is why we could never get on with the documentary film movement. Documentary films started with poetry and finished as prose. We storytellers started with naturalism and finished with fantasy'. See Michael Powell, *A Life in Movies* (Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 532.
- 3 Raymond Durgnat, 'Michael Powell' in Ian Christie, ed., *Powell, Pressburger and Others*, (BFI, 1978), p. 66. In his biography of his grandfather, Kevin Macdonald indicates how Pressburger's 'vision was basically old-fashioned anglican Tory: a belief in the wisdom and beauty to be found in continuity and tradition'. See Kevin Macdonald, *Emeric Pressburger*, pp. 233–4.
- 4 Raymond Durgnat, 'Michael Powell', p. 72.
- 5 Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (Routledge, 1994), p. 145.
- 6 Quoted in M. Keith Booker, *Colonial Power, Colonial Texts: India in the Modern British Novel* (University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 5.
- 7 Revathi Krishnaswamy, 'Evangels of Empire', *Race and Class*, 34: 4 (1993), 47–62.
- 8 Thomas Macauley, 'Minute on Indian Education', in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (Routledge, 1995), p. 430.
- 9 Robyn Wiegman, 'Race, Ethnicity and Film' in John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (eds), *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 164.
- 10 This is an argument developed by the anonymous author of 'Sex and the Indian Novel', *Cencrastus*, 25 (1987), 34–40. In Jhabvala's novels, the author suggests, 'the attempt to represent India has become a hysterical venture. . . . Knowledge of India can only be gained by experience, but to experience India is to know that India is unrepresentable' (40).
- 11 Charles Barr, 'In a Strange Land: The Collaboration of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger', *La Lettre de la Maison Française*, 11 (1999), 95.
- 12 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Peregrine, 1985), p. 1.
- 13 Michael Powell, *A Life in Movies*, p. 559.
- 14 Glenn Jordan and Chris Weedon, *Cultural Politics: Class, Gender and Race in the Postmodern World* (Blackwell, 1995), p. 263. Nannette Aldred suggests that 'the place of the erotic' is a key concern of Powell and Pressburger's post-war films. However, given the pre-existing associations of the East with the erotic in the Western imagination, the eroticisation of character and place in a film set in India – such as *Black Narcissus* – will necessarily acquire different connotations from a film set in England such as Powell and Pressburger's later *Gone to Earth* (1950). See Nannette Aldred, 'A *Canterbury Tale*: Powell and Pressburger's Film

• *Black Narcissus* and the Imagining of India

- Fantasies of Britain', in David Mellor, ed., *A Paradise Lost: The Neo-Romantic Imagination in Britain 1935–55* (Lund Humphries in association with the Barbican Art Gallery, 1987), p. 120.
- 15 Michael Powell, *A Life in Movies*, p. 574.
- 16 Rumer Godden, *Black Narcissus* (Pan, 1994; orig. 1939), p. 69.
- 17 Reina Lewis discusses the mix of moralism and voyeurism evident in Gérôme's paintings in *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (Routledge, 1996), pp. 113–4.
- 18 Michael Walker, 'Black Narcissus', *Framework*, 9 (1978/79), 9–13.
- 19 Noting the role played by Mr Dean in the film, Walker suggests that it would have been 'evasive' for the film 'merely to siphon off the suppressed sexuality by displacing it onto "sexual" natives'. See Michael Walker, 'Black Narcissus', 11. Nevertheless, Dean's ability to function as an erotic object of desire is partly the result of his strong association with India. Given the taboo against inter-racial romance in the cinema of this time, it could also be argued that his positioning within the sexual dynamics of the films itself involves a kind of 'displacement'.
- 20 Laura Kipnis, "'The Phantom Twitchings of an Amputated Limb": Sexual Spectacle in the Post-Colonial Epic', *Wide Angle*, 11:4 (1989), 42–51. Michael O'Pray also notes how 'a neurotic intensity of female sexuality becomes inseparable from the colonizing spirit' within the film but does not appear to register the ideological significance of this. See 'Radical Visionaries: Powell and Pressburger', *New Formations*, 1 (1987), 158.
- 21 Anon., 'Sex and the Indian Novel', 40.
- 22 Mary-Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (Routledge, 1992), pp. 201–213.
- 23 Anne Beezer, 'Women and Adventure Travel Tourism', *New Formations*, 21 (1993) 122.
- 24 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, p. 96.
- 25 Teresa Hubel, *Whose India?: The Independence Struggle in British and Indian Fiction and History* (Leicester University Press, 1996), p. 93.
- 26 Andrew Moor, 'No Place Like Home: Powell, Pressburger, Utopia', in Robert Murphy, ed., *The British Cinema Book*, second edn (British Film Institute, 2000), p. 110.
- 27 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, p. 7.
- 28 Michael Powell, *A Life in Movies*, p. 159.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 582.
- 31 Priya Jaikumar, 'Place and the Modernist Redemption of Empire in *Black Narcissus* (1947)', *Cinema Journal*, 40:2 (2001), 60.
- 32 Michael Powell, *A Life in Movies*, p. 159.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 563.
- 34 Charles Barr, 'In a Strange Land', p. 102.
- 35 A similar argument may also be made about the representation of a character such as Kanchi. While, at a narrative level, her sensuality may signify a threat to colonial order, at a visual level, she is subordinated to the 'mastery' of the look of the camera (and the implied male spectator). Indeed, Michael Powell recalls with some relish how Stewart Granger rushed out and proposed to Jean Simmons immediately after seeing her in the film. See Michael Powell, *A Life in Movies*, p. 585.
- 36 Michael Walker, 'Black Narcissus', 9.
- 37 An interesting example is provided by Pam Cook's recent discussion of Powell and Pressburger's *I Know Where I'm Going!* (1945), set in the Scottish Highlands, in which she is reluctant to accept the film's dependence upon a metropolitan fantasy of the Celtic periphery and works hard to demonstrate – with varying degrees of success – how the film may be read as evading this ideological regime. See Pam Cook, *I Know Where I'm Going!* (British Film Institute, 2002).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.