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# Black Narcissus: Sex and the Single Nun



Black Narcissus

By Dan Sallitt  
Films that astonish us have some value for that reason alone, and even viewers

who reject Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's 1946 *Black Narcissus* are usually impressed by its fantastic qualities. David Thomson put it succinctly: "*Black*

*Narcissus* is that rare thing, an erotic English film about the fantasies of nuns." Those of us who love the film as the fullest expression of Powell and Pressburger's

amazing talent still manage to get a little kick from the extremity of the subject matter. It's always fun to admire a work of art with one's mouth open: Both one's aesthetic and one's anarchic impulses are engaged.

*Black Narcissus* is also one of the most beautiful of color films, thanks as much to Jack Cardiff's rich cinematography as to Powell and Pressburger's vivid imaginative flourishes. A film this good can take care of itself even in second-rate prints, but the screening of an original nitrate three-strip Technicolor print at the Directors Guild Theater this Wednesday should guarantee anyone who sees it a few unforgettable images.

I have been referring to the directorial talent behind the film as "Powell and Pressburger," but, despite the equal billing in the credits, it is generally acknowledged that Powell was the dominant force behind the camera during the long (1939-1957) association. Pressburger, a Hungarian emigrant who received only writing credit on the films before 1943, is thought to have made most of his contribution in the scripting stages; his solo films after 1957 are said to be mediocre, whereas Powell's films before and after *The Archers* (the name of P & P's production company) are virtually interchangeable with his collaborations with Pressburger.

That Powell should not have been taken up by directorial cultists until the late seventies is inexplicable: Few directors are as conspicuous in either visual style or choice of subject matter. In fact, Powell made himself so conspicuous with *Peeping Tom* (1960), a film that casually linked film making to voyeuristic perversion and sadism, that he had difficulty continuing his career in England. *Peeping Tom* is now the film that most Powell enthusiasts would choose as his masterpiece, though I have always found it too fascinated with its visual schema and not sufficiently solicitous of our relation to its

remote central figure, played by Karl Boehm.

A quick survey of Powell's career reveals a strain of whimsy and a counterbalancing love of emotional fervor. Such films as *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943), *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), *I Know Where I'm Going* (1945), and *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946; known in America as *Stairway to Heaven*) are characterized by their fanciful subjects and their mystical underpinnings, elements that may be traceable to Pressburger. More to my taste are full-bodied dramas like *The Spy in Black* (1939), *49th Parallel* (1941; known in America as *The Invaders*), and *The Small Back Room* (1949), and emotive melodramas like *Black Narcissus*, *The Red Shoes* (1948), and *Gone to Earth* (1950; known in America as *The Wild Heart*).

*Black Narcissus*, based on a story by Rumer Godden, follows the attempt of five English nuns (among them Deborah Kerr, Kathleen Byron, and Flora Robson) to carry out their assignment to start a mission in the Tibetan Himalayas. At first the obstacles to their success are the ordinary ones: The natives are extremely superstitious and hesitant to accept the medical care or the education provided by the nuns; the local authorities are cynical and unhelpful; and the only European in the vicinity is a hardened agnostic (David Farrar) who makes grave predictions about the future of the mission.

But gradually the chief dangers of the region are revealed to be more subtle. The breathtaking physicality of the mountain geography and the intransigent Easternism of the surroundings start to have strange effects on the nuns. Gradually repressions start to break down: Kerr returns again and again in her mind to her lost romance in England; Robson and the other nuns exhibit such erratic behavior as planting flowers instead of vegetables; and, most threateningly, Byron, never very well-suited for the calling, experiences a neurotic surge of sexuality that

manifests itself in jealousy and violence.

Many directors could have done justice to the melodramatic elements of this story. Powell gives the appearance of being engaged by the overheated narrative; his visual arsenal includes abrupt changes in shot size, shock cuts, unusual angles and compositions, and other devices that could be seen as the melodramatist's stock in trade. But the faithful melodramatist will link extreme devices to the surges of the narrative, and Powell finds ways to avoid such linkage. In so doing he attains a philosophical perspective on his material that even great melodramatists like Borzage, Sirk, and Ray are barred from by the nature of their art.

A modest example comes to mind from the film's first scene, in which the aged Mother Superior gives Kerr charge of the planned Tibetan mission. The particular device that Powell uses is a set of unexpected close-ups of the older nun and Kerr, shots that emphasize the difference in age between the women. A melodramatic approach would link this emotionally charged visual difference to a conflict in the dialogue, thus externalizing an internal issue. But Powell uses his characteristically jagged editing to change the images at irregular moments, rather than with the flow of the dialogue, making the content of the images a com-

mentary on rather than an amplification of the personal interaction. Furthermore, he composes to emphasize the similarity of dress and position between the women, so that the age of the actors is the only element that varies from shot to shot. The net result is a rather frightening abstract effect that places a narrow situation in a broad metaphysical context.

Powell's complex style, a unique combination of distance from the material and dynamic and involving visuals, was remarkably well-suited to turn a difficult project into a memorable film. In addition

to the emotionalism of its subject matter, *Black Narcissus* flaunts a built-in tragic fatalism. The nuns are up against forces that they cannot defeat: One of the women must die, the rest must retreat in despair. Such fatalism, or indeed any form of mysticism, looks ludicrous without considerable philosophical perspective; on the other hand, the body of the story is meaningless without emotional fervor. It's hard to think of another director who could have steered so smooth a course between Scylla and Charybdis.

No one should fear that *Black Narcissus*

will be drained of force by Powell's philosophical temperament. What one remembers from the film are the blinding flashes of stylistic audacity: Kerr and her flashback lover vanishing into the blackness of a remembered night that itself evaporates like a dream; the thrilling red-on-yellow extreme close-up of Byron putting on lipstick, the nun's ultimate perversion; the eerie promenade that remaps the space of the convent before the final encounter of Byron and Kerr; Byron's uncanny materialization for that encounter, a specter conjured from the ether of a dozen

empty shots; and Powell's final coup, the mocking celebration of triumphant nature as expressed by the splashing of raindrops on a single foregrounded leaf.

Once dismissed by his contemporaries for his alleged tastelessness, later underappreciated by film scholars who were unable to categorize him properly, Michael Powell is finally being acknowledged as one of the cinema's most original stylists. Those who haven't discovered him yet won't find a better entry point than this screening. □