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Film Studies 380

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Reading Response 3: Black Narcissus (1947)

The director team of Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger are considered one of my favorite film director teams of all time, and I would place them aside other legendary British directors like Alfred Hitchcock, David Lean and Carol Reed. Powell was the director and Pressburger was the writer, but they always chose to take double credit as writer-directors, and were known as The Archers; with their iconic logo which was an arrow hitting its target. This director's team were very influential for young aspiring directors, most famously the great Martin Scorsese who has loved their work since he was a boy, and has helped on numerous occasions to get their films restored and re-released throughout the decades.

Powell and Pressburger have created several masterpieces together including such titles as *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* which flashes back between the life of an extraordinary man, *The Thief of Bagdad* which is an amazing special effects fantasy film which I would place on par with *The Wizard of Oz*, *A Matter of Life and Death* a fantasy romance that involves the courts of the heavens and the of love a earth woman; and finally the tragic musical [The Red Shoes](#), my favorite from the team, which tells a traditional Hollywood romance about a young ballerina who becomes an overnight sensation and falls in love with the composer of the ballet that inspired her.

Powell & Pressburger were brilliant storytellers but what made them stand out from many of their cinematic colleagues was their beautiful use of color throughout several of their films. Technicolor for them seemed to be much more than a creative alternative to the sublime poetry of black-and-white and in a sense color was often the true star of many of their films. I've always embraced black and white over color and found it to be a much more effective way of emphasizing detail and contrast when captured on the camera lens. And yet Powell and Pressburger proved that with the brilliant use of sophistication and artistry Technicolor can express a radiant and powerful aspect of cinema that black and white could never achieve.

The Powell and Pressburger film we watched in class was their erotic masterpiece *Black Narcissus* starring the great Deborah Kerr. The story involves the slow rise of sexual tensions of nuns in a remote convent that is set high up in the Himalayas. The nuns are ordered to form a hospital and school and convert the indigenous Indian townspeople. The group is run by Sister Clodagh and she is told to work with Dean, a handsome local British agent who has lived with the locals for some time and is skeptical of Sister Clodagh's efforts. The beautiful use of the Technicolor in *Black Narcissus* is renowned for its richly saturated hues, which radiated a powerful sensuality, along with sweaty flesh tones and creamy moist textures.

Along with *The Red Shoes*, *Black Narcissus* is one of the most beautifully rich technicolor films ever made and while watching it you will find yourself engrossed and drowned in the bold bright colors of reds, blues, greens and the beautiful lush symphony of geographical imagery that's presented on the screen. The story begins to get increasingly tense as Dean's masculine charms begin to affect several of the sisters, including Sister Clodagh and especially the unstable Sister Ruth. The film's hypnotic use of color seems to set the emotional and psychological stage for the unbearable sexual tension that affects both sisters all with the subtle

suggestions of quick infatuated glances and sudden lustful stares. Dean's masochistic sexual charms and hairy masculine physique brings back suppressed romantic memories of Sister Clodah's lost love, while also igniting the yearning lustful passions of Sister Ruth who becomes increasingly jealous of her superior, which ultimately leads her into madness.

This slow uneasy buildup will unfortunately lead to an inevitable violent conclusion on the top of a bell tower, which immediately brings to mind the tragic conclusion of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. "It is the most erotic film I have ever made," wrote Michael Powell. "It is all done by suggestion, but eroticism is in every frame and image, from the beginning to the end." And the brilliant addition of color adds yet another layer to the film's eroticism and mounting sexual tension. Because without the use of its vibrant color, many of the film's images would not have had its everlasting power. Sister Ruth carefully applying the deep red lipstick for instance, to witness that sequence in black and white would now be unfathomable.