

'Undefended Frontiers': Derridean Hospitality and Interstitial Chronotopes of Democracy in Powell & Pressburger's Wartime Feature Films

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The creation of in-between cinematic moments in Michael Powell's and Emeric Pressburger's films has sometimes been analysed in terms of "magic spaces"¹ or "capillarité",² although such categories have mostly been applied to films of a later period, briefly overlapping with that examined in this article (a famous instance being, of course, the central ballet sequence of *The Red Shoes*, 1948). I wish to argue that, in the context of the Second World War, it makes sense to view the genesis of such spaces as Powell and Pressburger's idiosyncratic response to totalitarianism – their own particular version of *London Can Take It!* (Humphrey Jennings, 1940), as it were. In a rather different historical context, we learn from the O.E.D. that of Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate, a Royalist Pamphleteer, Joseph Hall, termed democracy 'an interstice of government'. Indeed, when Powell and Pressburger started their partnership in filmmaking in the early 1940s, democracy in Europe was threatening to become such an "interstice in government" and, reading that phrase against the grain, I propose to submit that what was to become familiar to post-war audiences as a cinema of "magic spaces" actually emerged as an attempt to resist tyranny. For the duration of a film, several characters travel through 'interstitial spaces' in which the parts of host and guest are played by a number of key characters, often at the risk of death (the Hutterite community in *49th Parallel*, or Jo de Vries [Googie Withers] in *One of Our Aircraft is Missing*). Scenes of hospitality abound in the films, but the context of the war gives them an aura of danger and makes it relevant to refer to Jacques Derrida's analysis of the etymology of the word, which implies a reference to the double meaning of *hostis* – both enemy (Derrida refers to the biblical designation of God as 'Lord of Hosts') and guest.³ The narratives create opportunities for the staging of specific shots in which the setting, light and shadow, supported by dialogue and acting, offer special insights into such spaces where fellow craftsmen realise their fundamental fraternity: the blacksmith's

¹ Andrew Moor, *Powell and Pressburger: A Cinema of Magic Spaces*, London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2005.

² Natacha Thiéry, *Photogénie du désir. Michael Powell et Emeric Pressburger 1945-1950*, Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009.

³ Anne Dufourmantelle and Jacques Derrida, *De l'hospitalité*, Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1997.

workshop in *A Canterbury Tale*, the baker's in *49th Parallel*. In *A Canterbury Tale* the American sergeant, Bob Johnson, and the blacksmith, Jim Horton, 'speak the same language' although they were born on different continents, whereas Alison (Sheila Sim) feels they "don't speak the same language" although they were born in the same country. A tradition of craftsmanship and common understanding of nature makes the two men feel they share more than appears at first sight. This epiphany of kinship, which sometimes takes the strange form of a demise of pride and prejudice, often happens in bedrooms, for instance in *A Canterbury Tale*, with the bedroom where Sgt John Sweet is staying (the so-called "Elizabeth" bedroom) through the window of which he makes friends with the locals.

These brief democratic encounters fostered by Powell and Pressburger in their films make much use of the symbolism of frontiers. In her study of women and wartime British cinema, Antonia Lant makes the crucial observation that "wartime cinema staked out its meanings through an emphasis on boundaries, borders, coastlines, and maps, and through a new stratification, in plot and *mise-en-scène*, of the realms of air and land."⁴ Beyond this general statement, one can surmise that individual filmmakers had their own distinctive ways of bending this general thematic and imaginary material to their own ends, especially when it comes to one of the most controversial teams that worked in Britain in the early 1940s. Starting with the aptly titled *Contraband* (1940), shortly followed by *49th Parallel* (1941), Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger made a series of films which, in the context of what Ealing head Michael Balcon once termed the "happy marriage" of fiction and documentary during the Second World War, challenged every possible category of frontier one could think of. We find literal frontiers, materialised with maps and itineraries (from the already mentioned *Contraband* and *49th Parallel* to *One of Our Aircraft is Missing* [1942] and *I Know Where I'm Going* [1945]), as well as God's-eye views of the earth, combined with pseudo-documentary voice-over (in *A Matter of Life and Death* [1946]). Maps in Powell and Pressburger's wartime films often appear on screen when characters have to cross actual frontiers or boundaries between given countries or territories. However, the crossing of frontiers in their films can also be understood in terms of the cinematic experience itself, whether one talks about crossing the frontiers between cinematic genres or the limits of the filmic text itself. Indeed, we do find a number of metaleptic devices affecting the "threshold" of the filmic text, as in the beginning of *I Know Where I'm Going* or the beginning and ending of *One of Our Aircraft is Missing*. In the former film, the credits appear in a variety of guises as elements of the diegetic world (written on the side of a child's bed, on a slate, on a lorry, on the gate of a factory) rather than as the autonomous series of titles which formed the usual introduction to classical films of the period, while a male voice-over introduces the character of Joan (Wendy Hiller).

As for *One of Our Aircraft is Missing*, very much like in the later *Mr Arkadin* (Orson Welles, 1955), after several informative shots in documentary style, establishing the situation (a military station somewhere in England, where there is still no sign of the aircraft "B for Bertie"), we see a mysterious plane flying without a crew and eventually crashing into a pylon. A male voice then declares, "From this and other operations, one of our aircraft is missing", after which the actual credits sequence begins. It is only after this enigmatic start that we get to read the credits which further blur the frontier between reality and fiction by announcing that the film features "the Crew of B for Bertie". However, what follows is a series of shots of the main actors who announce the names of the characters they are playing, as their own names (Hugh Burden, Eric Portman, Hugh Williams, Emrys Jones, Bernard Miles, Godfrey Tearle) appear on screen, making us realise that the film we are in the process of watching is based on fact – not an unusual situation in British film production of the early 1940s. The absence of

⁴ Antonia Lant, *Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Cinema*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, 32.

any music is another element that denies the credits sequence its usual “threshold” quality, while the three dots that precede the first word of the title confirm that the film begins *in medias res*, as it were.⁵ Similarly, the last minutes of the film question the very notion of an ending: as the crew of ‘B for Bertie’ have been rescued once their mission has been completed, we might think that the film is over. Yet an inter-title appears (reading: “That was going to be the end of our story, BUT ...”), followed by a repetition of the cast list, very much in the fashion of 1930s classical Hollywood cinema (“a good cast is worth repeating”, as we read in the closing credits of some 1930s Universal Films, for instance), followed by the names of the technicians. A further inter-title informs us that they all “wanted to know what happened afterwards to the Crew of B for Bertie”: again, the fourth wall is broken. What follows is a sort of coda to the film, in which the crew of B for Bertie go on a new mission. Several shots of the older members of the crew repeat earlier shots from the narrative. This gives the impression of a new start rather than an ending, perhaps as a means of contributing to the uplifting mood of the whole. The film actually ends on aircraft taking off for Berlin, followed by symbols of the Dutch nation, as a choir sings the Dutch national anthem. Such metaleptic devices are not isolated in the wartime films of Powell and Pressburger. In some of them, several protagonists stand for filmic functions, especially that of the film director himself – the squire (Colpeper) in *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), Dr Reeves (Roger Livesey) in *A Matter of Life and Death*, with his invention of a ‘camera obscura’ being the most conspicuous examples.

The overall impression at this stage is that the crossing of frontiers – and possibly their ultimate suppression – was indeed on the filmmakers’ agenda.⁶ According to the authors of a study on *Black Narcissus* (1947), “many of Powell and Pressburger’s films display an interest in travel and displacement, the exile’s encounter with alterior (*sic*) landscapes and the liminal nature of border zones.”⁷ This bias seems to be confirmed by Michael Powell’s recollections about the internationalism of the Archers’ films: “this is a 100 % British film, but it’s photographed by a Frenchman, it’s written by a Hungarian, the musical score is by a German Jew, the director was English, the man who did the costumes was a Czech, in other words it was the kind of film that I’ve always worked on, with a mixed crew of all nationalities, no frontiers of any kind.”⁸ This is what Andrew Moor defined as ‘the Archers’ particular line of romantic international nationalism’. Commenting upon Powell’s various attempts at achieving an ideal art film in the wake of *The Red Shoes* (1948), Moor describes his vision of film in terms of the disappearance of frontiers: “Powell’s non-hierarchical view of art goes hand in hand with his internationalism: both express a wish to break boundaries”.⁹

As some sequences in the Archers’ films also seem to imply, boundaries are there to be defended. When Kretschmar-Schuldorff, in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, delivers his famous speech to an English customs officer, we may reflect that, at this point, the film upholds a cosmopolitan ideology: the eulogy of England as ‘home’ is uttered not only by a foreigner but by a character who represents a nation at war with it. Kretschmar-Schuldorff is a German officer in exile expressing nostalgia for England and intimate connections with the land and its people, and moments later he is

⁵ Although the actual title of the film reads *...one of our aircraft is missing*, all film titles in the present article have been normalised for the sake of consistency.

⁶ The crossing of actual frontiers was a frequent theme of many wartime propaganda films in any case, if only because missions to the Continent provided the material for the plots of key films such as *Target for Tonight* (Harry Watt, 1941) and *The Foreman Went to France* (Charles Frend, 1942).

⁷ Kelly Davidson and John Hill, “‘Under control’? *Black Narcissus* and the Imagining of India’, *Film Studies* 6 (2005), 5.

⁸ David Lazar (ed.), *Michael Powell Interviews*, Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2003, 107.

⁹ Moor, *Powell and Pressburger*, 228.

given a warm welcome by a fellow British officer. Thus, the sense of belonging is not rooted in the “birthplace” anymore and the ideology of “Heimat” finds a substitute in longing for a more diffuse concept of citizenship. Yet the same sequence, through the severer scrutiny of newcomers that it stages, also illustrates the vital need to protect the boundaries of Britain. Members of the audience then and now must both sympathise with Kretschmar-Schuldorff’s appeal to universal values and the rejection of Nazi tyranny, and, at the same time, commend the customs officer’s extreme caution before what – from his point of view – might be an enemy alien’s attempt to start a fifth column in Britain.¹⁰ Already in *49th Parallel* – the only feature film ever produced by the Ministry of Information – the introductory voice-over warned the audience that the frontier between Canada and the USA was “the only undefended frontier in the world”.¹¹ The opening section of *Contraband* is actually about the necessity of protecting the liminal space of the harbour of Ramsgate.¹² In the opening sequences of *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, the leitmotif “war starts at midnight” is only one aspect – the most comic one – of a similar vision: as Spud puts it while he plans to launch an attack well ahead of the appointed time, “See that barricade my boys? Well at midnight on the dot it’s gotta be closed and of course the enemy can’t get through before, because why? because... war starts at midnight!” Powell and Pressburger’s films do not fall into the trap of calling for the suppression of all frontiers, however generous it might appear at first sight. Instead, their films offer a more complex vision in which imagination and art affirm the existence of definite territories and worlds. There are boundaries between life and death; past and present; reality and fantasy; Englishness and foreign or regional identities, and their films imagine cinematic rites (rights?) of passage and paradoxical chronotopes that allow protagonists and viewers to cross them. Examples of paradoxical chronotopes are the beach where Peter Carter (David Niven) crashes in the opening sequence of *A Matter of Life and Death*, or the “stairway to Heaven” designed by Alfred Junge in the same film: each of these both denies and acknowledges the reality of the frontiers that separate two worlds. In the case of the beach, the process is gradual as it takes several shots for us to realise that this is actually an earthly landscape instead of some sort of ideal location suspended in time. In the first few shots showing Peter Carter waking up and taking a few steps around, every concrete element likely to connect his surroundings to the here and now of wartime has been carefully obliterated, thus making the audience uncertain about what world he has exactly woken up in.

Bearing in mind that the purpose of propaganda films was to illustrate “why we fight”, it is worth paying attention to the fact that the Archers had no simple definition of “we”. It is thus very important to realize that what lies behind the frontiers that have to be defended is not a notion of identity as homogeneous and closed in on itself but, on the contrary, and quite paradoxically, an inviting and open definition of Britishness as a space of liberty, democracy, and imagination. Even when the films do not

¹⁰ We should remember that the famous “sceptred isle” speech from *Richard II* (Act II, sc. 1), in which England is defined as “This fortress built by Nature for herself/ Against infection and the hand of war”, and the sea itself is described as serving “in the office of a wall/ Or as a moat defensive to a house/ Against the envy of less happier lands”, provided the titles of several more or less important wartime British films: *This England* (David Macdonald, 1941), *The Demi-Paradise* (Anthony Asquith, 1943), *This Happy Breed* (David Lean, 1944).

¹¹ Here is how Michael Powell introduced his project to a group of Canadian Ministers in 1940: “I said that our second aim was to bring America into the war with us, and this got a cheer. I said that as long as the frontier between the United States and Canada remained open, this was unlikely to happen. The object of our film was to get it closed, or at least patrolled and surveyed” (Michael Powell, *A Life in Movies. An Autobiography*, London: Faber & Faber, 2000, 350).

¹² “I thrilled to my Kentish toes at the prospect of showing how my country, with her long and vulnerable seacoast and her defenceless harbours, was already taking the war against Hitler into what he had the cheek to call ‘the German ocean’” (Powell, *A Life in Movies*, 338).

take place in Britain – which is quite often the case, actually – they stage encounters between characters who move through filmic spaces which make them experience that paradox and turn into chronotopes of what Britain was then – a democracy at war with totalitarianism. Very often the whole narrative and symbolic structure of the films emphasise their parenthetical quality – what we see takes place in a kind of suspended time, which sometimes requires the device of a flashback or a retelling of the same sequence from a different angle. Whatever the case, we get the sense that we are entering a territory in which the laws of what we call “normal” or “real” life will only be resumed once the lights come back on in the theatre. As Conductor 71 puts it to Peter Carter in *A Matter of Life and Death*, “We are talking in space, not in time”.

One specific manifestation of hospitality is commensality, which gives Powell many opportunities to stage an impressive number of meals, with a consistent emphasis on hospitality. Hospitality is more often than not conditional – for instance when members of the Dutch underground in *One of Our Aircraft Is Missing* have to make sure that the crew of the British airplane are not actually German spies – although there are cases of unconditional hospitality, as when the writer Philip Armstrong Scott (Leslie Howard) invites the last two Nazis to his camp in *49th Parallel*.

Comparable scenes of hospitality take place in *One of Our Aircraft Is Missing*, when the community of the Dutch resistance invite the crew of B for Bertie to share their food, and in *I Know Where I'm Going*, when Campbell invites Kiloran to the *ceilidh* or when Mrs Crozier invites the Robinsons to tea at the Castle of Achnacroish. Hospitality is actually one of the leitmotifs of Powell and Pressburger's cinema. As such, it proves quite relevant for our purposes: hospitality implies that one character or one group of characters introduces other characters into the spaces of otherness they embody and are familiar with. Hospitable individuals or groups act as go-betweens or intercessors between worlds – they guide the protagonists of the tales through the stages of some journey, like Colpeper with the pilgrims in *A Canterbury Tale*. In *I Know Where I'm Going*, Catriona (Pamela Brown) offers hospitality to Joan Webster, who mistakenly believes her fiancé, Sir Robert Bellinger, to be the actual Laird of Kiloran – and therefore Torquil (Roger Livesey) to be only his guest – until the latter introduces himself to her (as she is about to cross the threshold of the ruins of Moy Castle), thus suddenly reversing the host / guest relationship. This relation is made complex in the *ceilidh* scene as well when Campbell mistakenly calls Joan Webster “Torquil's Lady” and when we learn that the pipers who play for the dancers are actually those hired by Joan's fiancé (“the rich man of Kiloran”) and have been stranded due to the weather conditions. It is as if Joan's fiancé had somehow taken part in the setting up of the ceremony that symbolically brings Torquil and Joan together.

Although the mystical dimension of the journey completed by many characters is often unmistakable, we should also be aware that the numerous scenes of hospitality in Powell and Pressburger's wartime films function as a trope of democracy displaying its fundamental aversion to totalitarianism, especially as those scenes often provide opportunities to play down social or economic inequalities between characters, who stand out as individuals enjoying an equal status in their fight against a common enemy. In *49th Parallel*, the speech addressed by Peter (Anton Walbrook), the leader of the Hutterite community, to the group of Nazi invaders prefigures that delivered by the same actor in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*: in Europe, under the so-called “New Order” described by Commander Hirth (Eric Portman), Peter warns, “there will not be one corner, not a hole big enough for a mouse, where a decent man can breathe freely”. This gives a high value to tradition, destroyed by Nazism seven years previously, as is made clear by the story of the baker *Vogel* (the German word for “bird”), who, very much like Sergeant Sweet in *A Canterbury Tale*, finds that his craft forms a sound basis for establishing links with the local community (who need a good baker) and attempting to escape

the tyrannical authority of his commanding officer (he is, quite literally, a *bird* in a cage). The notion of “hostipitality” – a term coined by Derrida to name the paradox of an attitude which defines the other as stranger even as it attempts to make her or him feel at home – was also relevant to the context of the making of the films themselves: whereas Conrad Veidt, for one, was granted British citizenship in 1939, Alfred Junge was still considered an enemy alien, like Emeric Pressburger – a situation which actually reflected upon the plot and mood of *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*.¹³ Indeed, according to Tobias Hochscherf, Pressburger “had his own life and career in mind when he invented this story about a man who comes to Britain as a refugee from Nazi Germany.”¹⁴ Another important artist who contributed to the visual style of Powell and Pressburger’s films, Hein Heckroth, was a German émigré who originally designed sets and costumes for the theatre and fled Germany in 1935. He was interned as an enemy alien in Australia and entered the British film industry in 1943, joining the Archers as costume designers for *A Matter of Life and Death*.¹⁵

Thus, the governing paradox of Powell and Pressburger’s wartime films is that frontiers are there both to be crossed and to be protected, depending on circumstances and on the direction of the crossing – generally, their crossing implies an expansion of the influence of democracy and the imagination, their protection amounts to their preservation when under threat. This explains, first of all, the great variety and richness of liminal textures and symbols in those films: we find beaches (in *49th Parallel*, *One of Our Aircraft is Missing*, *A Matter of Life and Death*), lakes (in *49th Parallel*, the pool in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*), foggy or steamy places (in the first part of *Contraband*, in *One of Our Aircraft is Missing*, *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, *A Canterbury Tale*, *I Know Where I’m Going*, *A Matter of Life and Death*). Blackout sequences are also great favourites (see, especially, *Contraband*¹⁶ and *A Canterbury Tale*), and we should remember that these provide a trope associated with “undecidability” as Antonia Lant’s analysis has established through her characterization of *A Canterbury Tale* as “a limit text.”¹⁷ Spectacular whirlpools appear at least twice: a literal one – Corryvreckan – in *I Know Where I’m Going*, a stellar one in the form of a nebula in *A Matter of Life and Death*.

One symbolic frontier is particularly relevant to the notion of hospitality – that of the threshold. Most of the wartime films made by the Archers are actually about a threshold experience, the acme being Peter’s near-death experience in *A Matter of Life and Death*. Very often, crossing a threshold introduces characters into spaces of indeterminacy – the “magic spaces” we have already encountered – in ways that put forward signifiers of democracy at war. We shall now examine how this experience occurs in a few case studies.

In *Contraband*, Captain Andersen (Conrad Veidt), the Danish skipper of the *Helvig*, crosses a frontier in order to pursue Mrs Sørensen (Valerie Hobson), whom he mistakenly thinks is a spy (actually, she works for the English secret service). This event is staged in a typically foggy scene in which Captain Andersen is aboard a small boat. The whole plot revolves around his single-handed fight against fifth columnists headed by a German spy. Andersen is supported in his fight by his first mate’s brother, who owns a Danish restaurant in London. All of this forms part of the propagandistic dimension of the film:

¹³ Powell, *A Life in Movies*, 341. On Conrad Veidt, see Sue Harper, “‘Thinking Forward and Up’: The British Films of Conrad Veidt”, in *The Unknown 1930s. An Alternative History of the British Cinema, 1929–1939*, London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2000, 121–138.

¹⁴ Tobias Hochscherf, “British Anti-Nazi Films”, in *Destination London. German-speaking Emigrés and British Cinema, 1925–1950*, edited by Tim Bergfelder and Christian Cargnelli, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008, 190.

¹⁵ Laurie N. Ede, *British Film Design. A History*, London and New York: I. B Tauris, 2010, 55.

¹⁶ Robert Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, London and New York: Continuum, 2000, 21.

¹⁷ Lant, *Blackout*, 198-9.

imagining how Denmark, a neutral nation at the time, joins ranks with Britain against Nazi Germany. Interestingly, a leitmotif of the film is a patriotic tune played by Captain Andersen's watch, heard at the end of the film, very much as the Dutch National Anthem is heard at the end of *One of Our Aircraft Is Missing*. Frontiers also provide helpful escape from any menace to democracy: caught again by the German spymaster, Mrs Sørensen reminds him, when he talks about his powers of persuasion – a euphemism for torture – that she had managed to get free the last time she was in his hands. "You said that once in Dusseldorf; next day I crossed the Dutch frontier," she boasts: the Netherlands again appears, as in *One of Our Aircraft Is Missing*, as a symbol of liberty that goes a long way back in British memory, at least to 1688.¹⁸ Captain Andersen becomes the leader of a brotherhood based on kinship and comradeship, revived by the anthem played several times by Mrs Sørensen on his pocket-watch. In both films we understand that controlling frontiers is a matter of democratic life against totalitarian death.

In *49th Parallel*, the group of Nazi invaders is actually trapped in the in-between space between their destroyed U-Boat and the USA. They are killed one after the other, and each episode in the story provides the opportunity to disclose the values for which Britain is fighting, a small epiphany of democracy which goes far beyond the programme of propagandistic cinema which was typical of much British cinema at that time – including, as has been seen, the presentation of a "good" German with the complex character of Vogel. In *A Canterbury Tale*, Sergeant Sweet finds himself strangely bound to stay in Chillingbourne, although he intended to go to Canterbury. He is invited twice: the first time by the local squire, Thomas Colpeper, who gives him a voucher to stay for free at the local inn, the second time by the blacksmith, Mr Horton, with whom he shares a knowledge of woodcutting. In *I Know Where I'm Going*, Joan Webster will never reach Kiloran as the final leg of her journey ends up in a variant of magical space that encompasses all manner of legendary and popular superstitions, thus contrasting with the hard, rational, industrial values she has just left. This liminal space finds its acme in the ruins of a castle, full of windows and stairs, whose connecting and separating functions are emphasized by a succession of re-framings leading to the shot which brings the lovers together as the film nears its conclusion.

In *One of Our Aircraft Is Missing*, the pilots are stranded on Dutch soil after they have completed their mission, although, in this case, they will eventually return to England. In a way, this film is both thematically and formally the reverse of *49th Parallel*: how a bunch of British soldiers manage to enter Germany and come back.¹⁹ The very unusual treatment of the opening and closing credit sequences bears testimony to this reversal: as we saw earlier, the film actually has neither a clear opening nor a clear ending. One particular sequence relies on a daring use of the motif of the crossing of an actual frontier and implies a momentary identification of British pilots with their German enemies. As they are flying over the Channel towards Germany, the crew of B for Bertie muse about their memories of peacetime, and especially of German girls in Stuttgart. One of them, Geoff (Bernard Miles), remembers a song the girl he knew used to sing – in German, of course – and starts singing in the same language. He also displays some knowledge of German culture and is able to quote the name of one German newspaper, again in German. From their conversation, it emerges that Germany is not just a target for their bombs but also a place with a people and a past, with emotional and cultural ties with Britain. At this point, the skipper – who also used to date a German girl (a nurse called Ilse) – spots the Dutch coast

¹⁸ Jonathan I. Israel, *The Anglo-Dutch Moment. Essays on the Glorious Revolution and Its World Impact*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

¹⁹ Andrew Moor also noticed a contrast in terms of political outlooks: "Democratic, egalitarian order clearly contrasts with Hirth's team" (Moor, *Powell and Pressburger*, 50).

and this puts an end to this disturbing parenthesis before Germany becomes an enemy again. The crossing of the Channel has been a kind of lull in the narrative and in the mission, and this is symbolized by the insert of a single shot, showing an expanse of water without any limits, as if directions and identities could be reversed.²⁰

Thus, it appears that by the end of most of the films made by Powell and Pressburger in wartime, the main protagonists find themselves actually, or on the point of, crossing (symbolic) thresholds which give access to some sacred space: in the last section of *49th Parallel*, Lieutenant Hirth (Eric Portman) is thwarted in his attempt to cross the boundary between Canada and the United States of America. Canterbury Cathedral forms the climactic space where all paths converge in *A Canterbury Tale*, very much like Moy Castle in *I Know Where I'm Going* (where the lovers have to cross so many literal thresholds before they can be united). The "Stairway to Heaven" in *A Matter of Life and Death* is only the most obvious of such links between two worlds.

Powell and Pressburger's cinema has often been labelled "Romantic" or "Neo-Romantic", with the conservative or even reactionary connotations this may seem to entail.²¹ This opinion has generally been associated with their deliberate rejection of realist or naturalist aesthetics, which seem to define ideological positions on the opposite side of the political spectrum; such a case has been made by Alan Lovell on various occasions.²² Yet this would imply a simplistic and superficial interpretation both of their cinema in the 1940s and of Romanticism as a movement: Powell and Pressburger were attempting to achieve "subtle" propaganda – perhaps an oxymoron at the best of times – for the last European democracy at war, lest we should forget. This was the explicit agenda of *49th Parallel*, which "very carefully and conscientiously set out the advantages of adhering to the democratic ideals and of following the democratic system of government."²³ Some of the films they made in that period defy any attempt to pigeon-hole their aesthetics: "I had decided on complete naturalism", Powell declared about *One of Our Aircraft Is Missing*, while Robert Murphy has pointed out the "egalitarian" ethics of the crew of B for Bertie and claims that Pressburger "shows no interest in the English class system."²⁴ Nor did *A Canterbury Tale*, for that matter, in the way it tackled its Anglo-American theme, a preoccupation that re-emerged in *A Matter of Life and Death*. Like several other wartime films produced after 1943 in a context of anti-Americanism, both films attempted to bridge the cultural gap between Britain and America in ways that implied allegiance to the democratic ideal.²⁵ In a more oblique fashion, the characterization of the initial couple formed by Joan Webster and her fiancé in *I Know Where I'm Going* relies on a stereotype of the upper class preying upon the land, regardless of the vicissitudes undergone by the lower social strata of the population. Later on, pieces of dialogue make it clear that the local population of the island has had its share of the sufferings and shortages imposed by the war (saccharin is mentioned at one point). The impressively diverse body of work Powell and Pressburger produced

²⁰ This is echoed by another famous blurring of boundaries in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*: in his long speech, in close-up and long take, Kretschmar-Schuldorff reminisces about finding that the rural landscapes of Germany remind him of those of Britain and make him homesick – by which he means that he feels like going back to England.

²¹ Thomas Elsaesser, "The Tales of Hoffmann", in *Powell, Pressburger and Others*, edited by Ian Christie, London: British Film Institute, 1978, 62–65; Raymond Durnat, "'Aiming at the Archers': Sur Michael Powell", in *Rétrospective Powell & Pressburger*, edited by Roland Cosandey, Locarno: Éditions du Festival, 1982, 66–83.

²² Kevin Gough-Yates, "Heaven Can't Wait: Powell, Pressburger, and the Korda Tradition", *La Lettre de la Maison Française*, 11 (1999): 105-6.

²³ Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It. British Cinema in the Second World War*, London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007, 37.

²⁴ Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, 93-4.

²⁵ Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 285-96.

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during wartime brought forth uncharted filmic spaces whose founding paradoxes served an immediate purpose in the context of the war and paved the way for the more straightforward experiments in fantasy of peacetime.